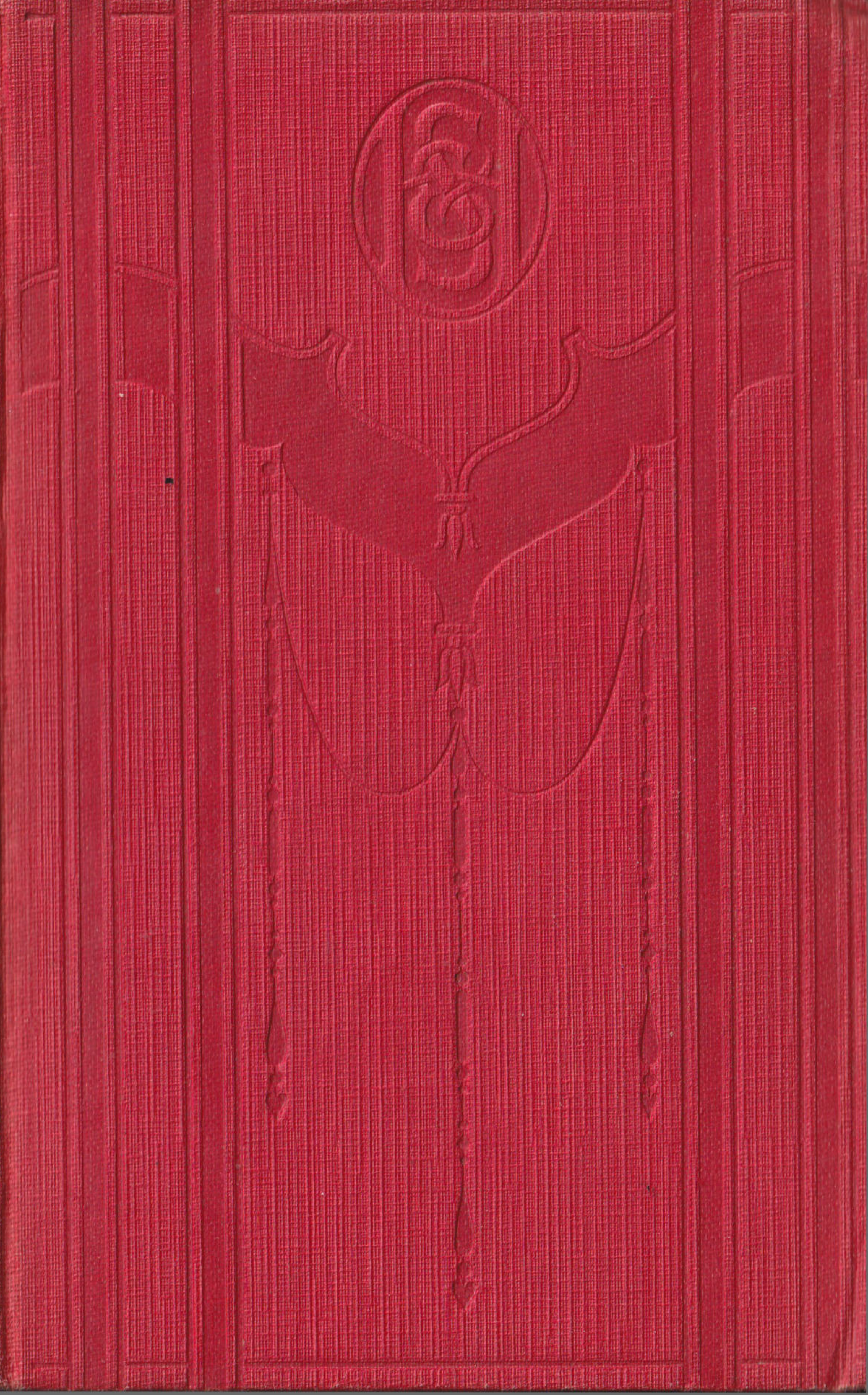
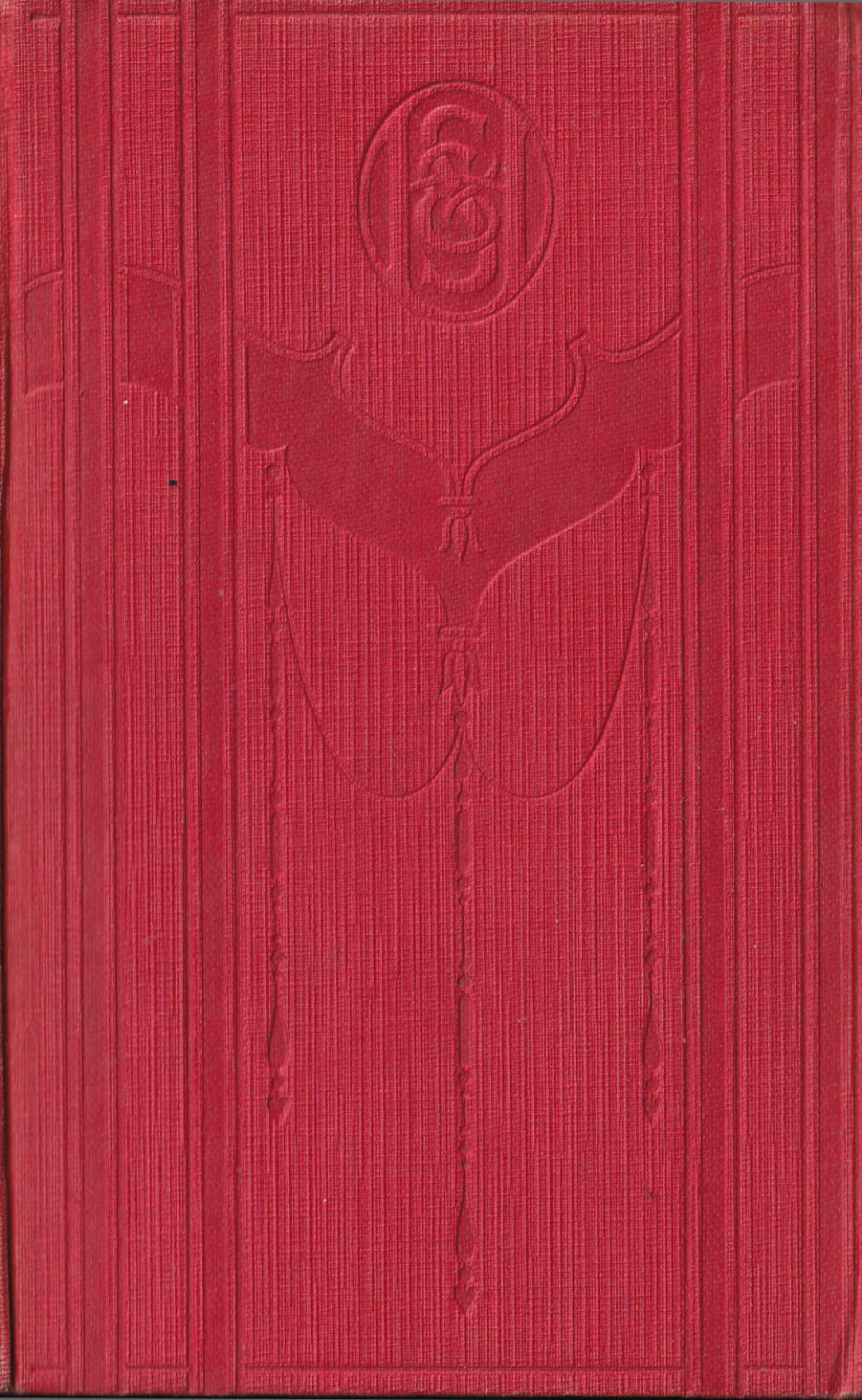


MEN FOR COUNTERS

GERARD FAIRLIE

HODDER & STOUGHTON



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MEN FOR COUNTERS

NOVELS BY

GERARD FAIRLIE

Copper at Sea
That Man Returns
Men for Counters
Treasure Nets
Mr. Malcolm Presents
The Rope Which Hangs
Birds of Prey
Shot in the Dark
Unfair Lady
Scissors Cut Paper
Stone Blunts Scissors
The Man Who Laughed
The Exquisite Lady
The Muster of the Vultures
Suspect
The Man With Talent

HODDER AND STOUGHTON
LIMITED LONDON

MEN FOR COUNTERS

BY

GERARD FAIRLIE

HODDER AND STOUGHTON
LIMITED LONDON

The characters in this book are entirely imaginary,
and have no relation to any living person

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PART ONE

ONE

For over an hour neither man had spoken: for over an hour, with lips firmly compressed into a straight line, eyes fixed in a deliberate stare ahead, they had continued to thread a passage through the trees which stretched for ever before them, tall and slim like pillars in some vast nightmare cathedral. They walked in a silence which had no root in ease, a silence of brooding disquiet that guarded a host of disturbing thoughts which neither dared nor cared to put into words. And all around them, awesome, immense, towered the gigantic trees, merging overhead into a shadowy obscurity pierced but rarely with an occasional glimpse of day.

It was late afternoon: the fourth afternoon that had seen the two men steering their course through the forest, a course in which their compass acted as sole guide; for the forests of Brazil, austere, mysterious and seldom explored by white man, provide few aids as to direction. For three nights they had lain down to sleep beneath the trees in a stillness so absolute as to be unnerving, a stillness into which they had waked the next morning to find it yet unchanged. Silence enfolded them like a cloak; it was as though, having once plunged through the thick undergrowth which skirted the edge of the forest, they had entered into another world, a world in which sound had no meaning and where the muffled tread of their own feet upon the ground seemed like an outrage, a violation of its virgin sanctity.

At first the utter lack of any sound had acted grievously upon the strained nerves of both the men, used though they were to the strangeness of the tropics. The occasional rare notes of a bird-call shrilling out from a neighbouring tree and shattering the silence with sudden clamour had brought them both to an abrupt stop, with their right hands half-way to the gun within their pockets. But gradually, as hour followed hour and still no sound came to startle them to caution, this very silence became itself a reassurance, the very vastness of the forest became a sanctuary, wherein, concealed from the sight of certain men they feared, they might yet attain to safety. Throughout the sultry heat of the day they had marched, pausing only now and again to rest or assure themselves about direction, and as the distance they had traversed increased appreciably, so did their spirits rise. Into the eyes of both men there crept a look of triumph, such as is seen only in those who against tremendous odds have achieved to knowledge. Knowledge, indeed, lay deep within their minds, a knowledge for which they had striven and sought throughout the past four years, and it was this which, despite the enervating heat, the terrible silence of the forest and the long, interminable march that lay before them, lent vigour to their feet, and, with the very urgency for its imparting, thrust fatigue away from their minds, spurring them on to ever-increasing speed.

After the first few hours to Alec Graeme the forest had become a friend. He had grown to love its brooding quiet, the cool dignity of those stately trees through whose merging tops he could at night catch a fleeting glimpse of stars: the very parasites which wound themselves in wild convolutions about each branch became a symbol, not of the sinister fact that life must ever thrive upon life, but that, liana-like, the knowledge which lay within them both must at last twist around the trunk of that infamous tree of evil which now flourished so outrageously and crush it into an impotent surrender. The obscurity of the place was soothing to eyes too long accustomed to the glare of a tropic sun, while, in the presence of his friend, that horror of loneliness which in these gloomy forests has been known to drive many a man over the edge that precipitates to madness, bore little menace.

They had been good friends, these two, although the barrier of a different nationality and more than a dozen years divided their ages, but despite the greying hair, the tight lips and cynically smiling eyes of Tony Valais, there was a spirit of youth about him which spanned the gap with ease, so that—a somewhat essential factor where a friendship is concerned—the two men were at once of the selfsame generation. A Frenchman, born and educated in England, the older man spoke the language with the ease and fluency of a native, and his temperament, although essentially Gallic in all fundamentals, was yet sufficiently Anglicized for his sympathies to be entirely in accord with those of the Scot, Alec Graeme. Speech had always passed easily between them. Even since entering this world of shade and gloom, though the urgency of their march throughout the day forbade much chatter, yet always that last hour before they slept had been made a pleasant space, enlightened with many a stirring tale and cheering jest. But now, in some curious way, speech had become a thing not to be ventured upon, both men only too loth to put into words the fears that haunted their thoughts: for neither knew that the other had any suspicion of the peril which lurked behind.

When he had first sensed it Alec could not quite tell; there had been no betraying footfall, no sudden vision of a quickly hidden form, but with a certainty which increased even as the shadows of the afternoon lengthened, he knew that the security he had envisaged within that forest was but a myth, the silence sinister as a lull before a storm, the tall slenderness of the trees but a cover for pursuing men. To those who have lived for long with danger ever at their elbow there is given another sense, a feeling of safety when the peril is past, a warning of evil when the danger approaches. And it was this apperception which had come to Alec Graeme but an hour or so before. Cautiously he had cast a furtive glance around, knowing even as he did so how futile was his quest, for if the men who followed were those he feared there would be small chance of their shadowing being perceived. From the days of their great-great-grandfathers down to the present time the lore of pursuit had been taught, learnt and improved upon until by now an Indian has become a synonym for the power of a stealthy and invisible pursuit that approaches the uncanny. Brave man though he was, as he thought of the miles of tropical forest separating them from their own kind Alec Graeme involuntarily shivered, and all the elation and triumph that had glowed so warmly within his heart became frozen into an elusive memory.

So they were not going to get through after all. It was no strain of pessimism that forced the conviction into Alec's mind: one need be no pessimist to realize the unfailing surety of an Indian's pursuit, and it was with a heavy heart that he dismissed all chance of their escape. With stern, set face, which revealed little of the doom within his mind, Alec continued to march briskly along, casting a sidelong glance at his friend from time to time, to see whether already to him also there had come foreboding. But, as usual, the face of Tony Valais was without expression. Handsome in a gaunt, stark way, it was as the man himself, imperturbable and calm with a composure that very few events had ever yet been known to ruffle. Whatever passed through the mind behind those inscrutable light-blue eyes no one would ever know by even the most intent examination of his face. Tony Valais had not lived for twenty years a life in which the least unguarded expression on his features, the merest flicker of an eyelid in a momentary surprise, the sudden tightening of the lips might mean a bullet in his head, without learning to govern any emotion, however strong, with an amazing self-restraint.

Alec knew that he could glean nothing from the lean profile of the man beside him, and after one or two glances in his direction he decided to wait a little longer before broaching his suspicions. Bitterness filled his mind. They had been so near, so very near to complete success; only another few days and the work of four years would have reached fruition. To be baffled now was too ghastly a happening to bear contemplation: the lives of so many people would be forfeit should that knowledge, so dearly bought, be buried with them. For that it was death which lurked so stealthily within the shadows of the trees around he did not doubt for a single moment. Tony Valais and he knew far too much to expect to escape alive, but although the thought of death was far from pleasing, it was no instinctive clinging on to life which now clouded the young man's mind with a bitter gloom. Inured through many years to incessant risks and perils, Alec Graeme was too great a stoic to fly to panic at a sudden alarm, but it was the insupportable thought that they would have died in vain . . . have lived and died in vain . . . the tedious work of a thousand hazardous days rendered null and void even in that second it would take to dispatch that poisonous messenger of death which is an arrow, which filled his mind with a depth of misery which, in the whole of his adventurous career, he had never before savoured.

The shadows in the forest were growing momentarily longer; in a very little while now the sun, which somewhere outside this monotony of green was setting gloriously in a brilliant burst of colour, must sink beneath the horizon, and on the instant that obscurity of light which among the trees was all that stood for day, would vanish immediately and night, with its attendant dangers, close in around them.

Alec shivered. The thought of an attack by night had even less appeal than had one by day, and a sudden yearning to discuss their plight with the man by his side made him turn to Valais with a quick determination. But the sentence was stillborn, for even as he had opened his mouth to speak, a dusky form slipped into view through a parting of the trees a few yards ahead, remained poised for a moment, and then, silently as it had come, disappeared once more into the shadowy dimness beyond.

The two men came to an abrupt stop: they looked searchingly, almost shyly at each other, as though afraid to see the realization in the other's eyes. For a moment or two each held the other's gaze, and then, with that ready courage which had never failed him, Tony Valais smiled his relief.

"Thank heavens, Alec," he said, "I haven't got to break the sad news! So you've known about it, too?"

Alec nodded.

"For over an hour," he said.

They were both silent a moment, and then, with one accord, they continued their march. But now the two men walked close together, and in the right hands of each there gleamed an automatic.

"There's just one thing," said Valais slowly. "We needn't be afraid any more of an arrow in the back. For the last few miles I've tottered along tremblingly, shaking in every limb at the bare possibility."

Alec laughed involuntarily. The picture his words had conjured up of a panic-stricken Valais was so fantastic as to compel mirth even in that grim moment, and with the laughter something of that bitterness which had filled his soul was dispelled instantly.

"No," he said, "now they've shown themselves, that means capture and presentation to the Big Boy, whoever he may be."

"Finishing with an unpleasant death to slow music before a leaping forest fire . . . *without* benefit of clergy," put in Valais cheerfully.

Alec nodded. But already his thoughts, refusing to dwell upon the probable end for them both, were busy casting about for a means whereby their message might yet be saved.

"When do you think they'll attack?" he asked.

The other shrugged his shoulders expressively.

"God knows," he said slowly. "When they've finished playing with us, I suppose. In the art of creating an atmosphere of suspense an Indian's got nothing to learn from the gentle antics of cats with mice . . . only no cat would be quite so callous."

There was a pause for a few moments and then Valais continued thoughtfully:

"At dawn to-morrow, most probably. It's a funny thing, Alec, how many very unpleasant things always seem to happen at dawn. A deserter is shot . . . a murderer hanged . . . all at dawn; and," he added whimsically, "in the great cities millions of unfortunate people have to drag themselves from the life of their dreams to the death of their monotonous lives . . . at dawn!"

But for once his friend's sally met with no response from Alec. Already his brain was working out an idea which, like some blossom flowering in a desert soil, had sprung to life out of the despair in his heart and matured with lightning speed. He was silent for a moment or two more, and then he turned to the other quickly.

"Supposing . . ." he started: but with that instinctive knowledge of another's mind which comes so often to those who have lived much together, Valais caught at his unspoken thought.

". . . We separate?" he murmured, and he shook his head at once. "No, that wouldn't be much good. A chap would have to be very clever to get past an Indian, Alec. They'd get us either way. No, I don't want to be pessimistic, old man . . . but I'm afraid we're for it."

Gloom settled upon Alec at the words. Not for a moment did he dispute them: to the lightest word of Tony Valais he attached more importance than to the most ponderous utterances of other men. If his friend thought that their plight was desperate, then indeed it must be beyond all aid, and without further comment he sank once more into unhappy thought.

The light in the forest was now so dim that they could see nothing more than a yard or so before them, yet they continued to walk. Movement was essential to them both: to sit down and wait for the attack to commence was too horrible a prospect to bear consideration. In a silence which the knowledge of shared peril had changed utterly from that lonely silence of a little while before into a warm, companionable intimacy, each man moved with deliberate steps through the increasing dark, their eyes strained ever for another glimpse of that dusky form. Yet even so it was not until they were actually but a few feet from them that they saw the huts.

Immediately to the right of them, a few paces from a running stream, stood three squat huts of the most elementary type in the last stages of dilapidation, remnants of some Indian settlement. Valais sighted them first, and he halted on the instant, in his eyes a dawning flicker of hope.

"We'll camp here for the night," he said, "and perhaps we might try your plan after all, Alec."

But it was not until some time later, when they were both seated within the least rickety of all the huts, that Valais expounded his idea.

" Alec," he said, and there was a gravity in his voice which the younger man had but rarely heard, " the luck seems to have gone against us. Our hopes of getting out alive are . . . well, not so good. There's just one chance, though . . . and we've got to take it."

He paused for a moment and then continued quickly:

" It's a godsend our stumbling upon these huts like this. It just gives us a loophole. As soon as it's pitch dark, Alec, you've got to steal off and try to get through. I'll rig up some sort of figure in the opening of the hut to represent you, and then I'll sit down outside a few yards away as though on guard. Every now and again I'll talk as though to you inside the hut . . . in the dark they'll never be able to realize that your outline's only a dummy, and by the morning you should be well away."

Again he paused and stared through the open door at the black mystery of the trees beyond: then:

" In another half-hour I should think it would be dark enough for you to go," he added quietly.

Valais thrust a hand into his coat pocket and found his pipe. Throughout his little speech he had carefully refrained even once from looking at his friend, and it was only when the tobacco was glowing richly that at last he turned and faced him squarely.

" Well, Alec," he said, " what do you think of it? Got any further suggestion? "

For a moment the two men held each other's eyes in a long look, a look which conveyed a thousand things that neither could ever have put into words. Memories of dangers cheerfully shared, of long nights spent in talk, of days during which, bit by bit, they had evolved that stupendous certainty, that tremendous knowledge which was the one reason for this forest march back to the man who awaited their news, passed through the minds of both . . . but these were things too precious to be talked about. A little while the silence held, and then Alec Graeme patted the other's shoulder in a characteristic gesture.

"It's a splendid idea, Tony," he said, "but you've got the details wrong. *You're* the one to go . . . not me."

Valais laughed.

"I was afraid you were going to be obstinate," he said. "Well . . . if you feel like that, let's cut for it. Lowest goes—highest stays—aces count high. That suit your dogged British pride?"

Alec nodded his head, and from a capacious pocket the other withdrew a well-thumbed pack of cards that had settled many a weighty question between the two. They were seated upon the ground, which acted also as their table. Valais placed the cards in front of Alec.

"Cut," he said curtly.

Alec did so with a casualness which gave little hint as to the gravity of the matter that was at stake. Lightly he chose his card and turned it upwards for his friend to see.

"The knave of diamonds," he said.

Valais nodded. There was no vestige of a smile, nor indeed any cynicism now in his eyes as he leant forward towards the pack of cards before him to select his own. The mask that was his face became even more set and sphinx-like as he stretched out his hand. Within the hut it was very dark, lit only by a flickering candle, and it was, therefore, not difficult for a man of Valais's skill to substitute a card he had retained within his pocket for one he drew from out the pack. A second later this card lay upon the floor.

It was the ace of spades.

"I win," said Valais coolly. "And you go."

Alec made no reply. He could not have spoken had he wished, but his right hand found and clasped that of his friend in a grip which conveyed far more than anything he could express in words. Then he rose abruptly and moved over towards the open door, where he stood a moment staring out into the night before him. Almost at once Valais was by his side. They were both silent, with ears keyed for the slightest sound, the crackling of twigs beneath a dusky foot, the fictitious calling of a bird, but they heard nothing, saw nothing save the black trunks of the trees immediately in front. So intense was the silence that it seemed utterly divorced from any natural, wholesome thing: the quiet was that of a grave, the forest their tomb, and it was with a momentary shudder of realization that each man contemplated the horror that would be this silence when the other one had gone. Thoughts like these, however, were not for long tolerated in the minds of either, and with a quick return to the urgencies of the situation, both drew back again into the shelter of the hut, and there, seated upon the floor, they spoke together for long in whispers, Valais giving minute instructions as to the course the other should pursue.

The half-hour went very quickly and it was with a shocked surprise that Alec realized the time had come to part.

In his adventurous life Alec Graeme had been forced to do many things which his soul abominated, but never before had he felt such despair in his heart as in this gross abandoning of his friend to a lonely fate. Only the urgency of the message he carried, and all the responsibility which such a course must entail, turned him from refusing then and there to essay this last chance of attaining freedom. Even so, for a moment his determination wavered, and almost he resolved to stay: but at once, as though in answer to the unspoken thought, the other spoke quickly:

"So long, Alec . . . and good luck. Remember—*you've* got the most gruelling job, and when you get through you can come back again . . . with help."

"God! Tony, I never thought you'd beat that knave!"

Valais laughed easily.

"The luck was with me," he said, and he smiled to himself at the ironic truth that lay behind his words.

Both had arisen and were standing now within the hut. For a moment there was silence, and then Valais held out his hand.

"Good-bye, Alec," he said simply. "You'd better be off now. I'll wait in here until you've gone and then arrange your dummy. I'm afraid it won't flatter your physique a great deal . . . but possibly our friends haven't studied anatomy! "

He laughed, and easily.

" Good-bye, Tony," said the Scot quietly, but his voice was thick, " good-bye. . . . I had begun to hope that it wouldn't end like this . . . but . . . oh, well . . . good-bye."

He turned away from his friend and a moment later had slipped out of the open door and vanished lightly as a shadow into the sinister blackness of the forest.

The man within the hut remained motionless, straining every sense to catch any sound which might warn him that the other's flight had been observed. One minute passed . . . two . . . five . . . and then Valais relaxed. There was a smile upon his face as with steady hands he lit another pipe and proceeded at once to rig up quickly from the contents of his pack the vague semblance of a human form.

TWO

In after years there were very few things that Alec Graeme was ever able to remember of that lonely journey by night through that silent forest of Brazil, a forest that he knew to be alive with hidden foes. Of one thing only could he think, and that was of the friend he had left alone in the dilapidated little hut upon the banks of the stream, and throughout the long hours of the night his mind seemed to run ever on a double track, one part taking the most elaborate precautions against discovery, the other intent upon the fate that must soon overtake Valais.

His left hand held a tiny illuminated compass and it was by its aid that Alec was now able, despite the utter blackness of the night, to ensure his direction. Tall, spare of build and experienced, it was not too difficult for him to emulate the cautious movements of his enemies, and thus it was as a shadow moving in a world of shadows that he slipped noiselessly through the cover of the trees.

At one time a bird-call had shocked him into entire immobility: flattening himself against the trunk of a large tree he had remained motionless, with heart beating fast, waiting breathlessly for the call to be repeated. And again, weirdly, it had come, and then with a sudden wild flapping of wings a bird had swooped down low within the branches of the tree beneath which he stood . . . and with a relieved smile parting his lips Alec had mocked at himself for his fears.

The monotonous journey then continued, until with the coming of dawn the need for a hiding-place throughout the day became a grim necessity. Were his escape already discovered the forest would be far too dangerously peopled for him to continue his journey while the light persisted. He must seek cover for the daylight hours and go on again when night had fallen. A hollow tree lying in a tangled glade suggested possibilities of shelter which Alec did not fail to note, and throughout the long hours of the next day he lay prone within the trunk, a happy hunting-ground for all the myriads of ants and insects which infested its bark. After a while, and in spite of their attentions, he slept, and when at last he woke to cramped and bewildered realization of the place in which he lay, he painfully crawled to the top of the trunk and peered cautiously outside, seeing that the day was now far advanced, and that in about another hour or so night was to fall. The hour passed slowly, night came at last, and with it Alec emerged gratefully from the narrow confines of his prison and set off once more with nearly noiseless tread through the thickness of the trees.

He continued throughout that night until another dawn found him seeking again a place to hide. This time, however, there was no hollow trunk, and for want of a better cover Alec selected a tree whose branches proved not too inaccessible for him to climb. In a little while he had clambered up it and was hidden from sight behind its screen of foliage.

A terrible day followed, for Alec dared not sleep lest he should fall and break his neck upon the ground below. His pockets were full of food and cigarettes, but although he longed for the latter as he had never before yearned for the solace of tobacco, he limited himself strictly to the food, knowing that to smoke would be but to declare his presence to any Indian lurking within a mile or so.

Happily nothing, however drastic, lasts in this life for ever, and so, when the possibility of the day ending had seemed but a foolish fancy, heat-begot, night came again, and with it Alec promptly skinned down the trunk of his tree and set off at once as his compass pointed.

Whether it was, however, that so much success had made him careless, or whether his numbed brain, yearning for sleep, could no longer direct his limbs to the needed caution, it was now with more thought for speed than silence that Alec hastened through the trees. Twigs crackled noisily beneath his feet . . . but the man himself was far too spent to care; his outstretched hand struck a branch before him into trembling indignation, this in turn set in motion the leaves of another tree immediately behind, so that it would have needed no great vigilance on the part of any Indian to realize with certainty that someone had but lately passed. But heat, fatigue and thirst—for he had drunk nothing at all for several hours, having long since exhausted his own supply of water, and never having the luck to chance upon a stream—had made Alec Graeme reckless to the point that bodes disaster.

Disaster was not long in coming. For suddenly rounding the stalwart trunk of a tree, dark forms closed in around him and before he had time to realize their coming, two pairs of arms were twined crushingly about him and he found himself staring, aghast, into the exultant eyes of a swarthy Indian.

Frantically he fought to be free . . . but his efforts were useless. In an amazingly short space of time he was fettered hand and foot, lifted lightly from the ground and borne, like some bale of goods, upon the shoulders of his captors, one supporting his head and the other his feet. As though the burden they carried weighed no heavier than a pack of feathers, the Indians set off at a good speed in a direction opposite to the one in which Alec himself had been marching.

So began a journey which, in after years, was to return to Alec again in many a ghastly nightmare; a journey appalling in its misery of both body and soul. For if his limbs were aching through the eternal jogging up and down as his captors bore him swiftly through the trees, his wrists and ankles a fiery torture from the tightness of his bonds, yet was his agony of spirit a thing far harder to be borne: and even as the journey lengthened, so did the soul of Alec Graeme writhe within him. He had been so near to success, so tantalizingly near! Perhaps only one more night and he would have got through. Of that he felt certain: but by his own crazy over-confidence, his utter lack of elementary precaution, he had tossed his chance aside, that chance which Tony Valais had been so eager that he should seize. The thought of his friend was an added sorrow, an added sting to his self-reproach. Their parting had been made in vain. Far better had they remained together, accepted the tragic sequel to their four years of work with a resignation made more possible by each other's nearness. But now they were apart: Tony Valais already, perhaps, a prisoner, or—a thing as yet impossible to contemplate—perhaps he was already done to death. Where he himself was being borne Alec did not pause to think, did not, indeed, overmuch care. The cup had been snatched from his mouth even as his lips were parted to quaff it: snatched and this time irreparably broken, for Alec knew with a despairing certainty that no other chance would ever be forthcoming for attempt at flight. And this time the snatching was even harder to be borne . . . for he was alone.

The Indians were carrying him horizontally upon their shoulders, so that his face was towards the sky, and through his half-parted eyelids Alec could see an occasional star gleaming through the interstices between the merged tops of the trees far overhead. The sight calmed him: in some curious way he found reassurance in the thought that somewhere out of this accursed mass of trees nature was ever the same, reassurance also in the thought which accompanied it, that everything which had gone before, everything which must follow, was already written in the stars, foreordained, inescapable. It was a comforting philosophy which removed a little of that insupportable weight of remorse which had bowed down his heart so unbearably at the thought of all those men who must suffer from his carelessness.

The jerking was now less intolerable—or perhaps it was that his frame was becoming more inured to it—but after a while the eyes of Alec Graeme closed entirely and he sank into the deep sleep which for so many hours he had been sorely needing.

Within the forest the tree trunks gradually emerged from blackness into shadowy outline as day approached. But still Alec Graeme slept. The speed of his captors had diminished appreciably as the heat of the day increased, yet throughout the long hours like a log the young man slept, and it was only when an unexpected shaft of sunlight playing upon his face startled him into a surprised awakening that he opened his eyes and stared around.

For a moment or two his mind was a blank; and then, with a crashing completeness, the whole sequence of events since he had entered the forest with Tony Valais, not so very long before, became clearly defined. With an ache in his heart he remembered the grim failure that had befallen his mission. The sunlight troubled his eyes and at once he closed them again, but even as he did so, this very fact, that the sunshine offended them, assumed its true significance.

So they were out of the forest at last: the trunks of those accursed trees no longer surrounded him. And although in truth this fact bore little point upon his own predicament, yet Alec felt strangely relieved: at any rate he would have seen the open sky once more before he died. Again he opened his eyes and found himself staring up into the blue. He had been right; no trees obscured his gaze. But the light was far too strong for him to support it for long, and in another second he had closed his eyes again and was busy thinking. Where were they taking him? To the man himself? To the one person about whose doings he and Tony Valais had shown such perilous curiosity? The idea was not soothing, and after a little while Alec dismissed it from his mind, finding, indeed, sufficient to occupy him in the discomfort of his body. For his throat was raw with the vital need for water, his limbs prey to a thousand aches, his wrists and ankles an agonizing torture, and it was only by firmly clenching his lips that he was able to prevent a moan of pain from breaking through them.

Hour followed hour and still, with only occasional pauses for rest or refreshment, the Indians kept up the same steady tramp. To the man they carried, however, all time had fallen into a haze; the pain and heat had made him a little light-headed, and he was now only half-conscious as they bore him along.

It was late afternoon when at last the Indians slackened speed and then came to an abrupt stop. Vaguely Alec was conscious of the subdued mutter of voices. Once more the men continued to walk, but this time they were mounting steps: there was a sharp, metallic clang as though a door had been shut behind them . . . and immediately he was conscious of a great relief. For now the sun no longer beat down upon his face. Yet still the Indians walked, and again Alec could hear a door slam to behind them: down some steps they went—and here the coolness was even more apparent. Again his bearers stopped: there was the unmistakable sound of a key grating in a lock, a few more steps he was carried and then lowered to the floor.

But an utter lack of curiosity, engendered by his weak condition, made the opening of his eyes too tedious a thing for Alec to venture upon . . . until a voice called him by name, a voice he had never hoped to hear again, and with the instant opening of his eyes he stared up incredulously into the lean face of Tony Valais.

For a long moment they stared at each other, but suddenly Alec moved his head as if to lift it; a fierce jab of pain cut across his brow, and with a stifled cry he fell back again: once more the darkness closed in all around him.

THREE

WHEN he opened his eyes Alec Graeme was surprised to find himself staring not at the tops of giant trees, nor the blueness of a tropical sky, but at the whitewash of a stucco ceiling. Puzzled, he raised his head, but again that stabbing pain shot across his forehead and involuntarily he moaned aloud.

On the instant the anxious face of Tony Valais was bending over him.

"Drink this," he heard him say, and a glass of water was held to his lips.

Gratefully, frantically almost, Alec drank, drank until the glass was empty, and then he begged for more.

"Easy now, easy," commanded Valais cheerily. "How goes it? Pretty rocky?"

"Pretty rocky," assented Alec feebly; but with every moment he felt himself becoming stronger. The pain in his wrists and ankles was now no more an anguished torture, and at once he realized the reason: no longer were they bound with biting ropes; instead, wet rags were tied soothingly about them.

For a moment or so Alec remained motionless, his mind too dazed to think, but suddenly curiosity sprang to life again within him and, staring up at his friend, he asked the vital question:

" Where are we, Tony? "

The other laughed.

" Good," he said, " now you must be feeling better. You'll be asking for a stronger drink and a cigarette in a few moments, and then I'll know you're almost normal. I can tell you, Alec, you gave me a fright for a moment . . . I thought you were a goner! "

Alec smiled painfully.

" Sounds optimistic," he murmured weakly—" sounds as though we're not—where I feel we must be—in the lion's lair."

Valais nodded his head quickly.

" You're right, Alec," he said, and his voice was serious, " we're in the lair, never fear . . . and I don't suppose by this time to-morrow it will make much difference whether you've got sunstroke or not. Not much use blinking the facts. Have a spot more liquid? "

From his pocket Valais pulled out a tiny flask of brandy which he always carried, and held it to the other's lips. As the warm spirit coursed through his veins Alec felt his interest in life increase appreciably. Gingerly he raised his head, and this time he found that the pain across his eyes was far less intense. Eagerly he took in the details of the place in which he lay.

They were in a square-shaped room brilliant with sunlight and white plaster; the floor was bare, and for furniture there was merely a rickety table, two pallet beds and a narrow bench. Upon the table, however, Alec saw a tray containing a large caraffe of water, glasses and some food. His eyes appraised these last with reviving hope: they were, indeed, scarcely the sort of things to enter the cell of men condemned to death. The sight was a gracious one and his spirits rose.

"Why the food, Tony?" he asked, "unless they want us to go well fed to our doom."

The other nodded: there was an eager ring in his voice as he replied:

"Exactly. That's just what's been worrying me for days."

"*For days!*"

Alec stared his surprise, and then he added quickly:

"Tell me, Tony, when did they get you? Soon after I went?"

Valais shook his head.

"Not until dawn the next day. I told you unpleasant things always happen at dawn. They gathered round the hut, half a dozen of 'em, and got me before I could even fire a shot."

He paused a moment, and then he smiled as though at some memory that pleased his heart.

"And, oh, Alec," he continued quickly, "their faces when they found I was alone!"

Alec smiled: but at once his face clouded swiftly.

"And then I up and went and did it!"

His tone was bitter. Thoughtfully, from between narrowed eyelids, Valais watched him; at last he put the question he had been longing to ask ever since, trussed up and half alive, Alec Graeme had joined him in his cell.

"If you're feeling fit enough, Alec," he said quietly, "let's have it. How *did* you bog it?"

In a strained voice Alec told him, sparing himself none of the blame for that fatal lack of care which he knew had doomed him. But when he had finished, the elder man nodded his head reassuringly.

"Well, it was not to be, Alec, that's all we can say about it. It's no use your reviling yourself. You did your best, old man. You must have been half dead with fatigue when they caught you . . . and anyway, we're still alive . . . and strangely enough, Alec, I don't think we're going to be exterminated."

"You don't what?"

Alec raised himself again, and resting on one elbow he stared at his friend.

"I don't think we're going to be killed," said the other seriously. "If we were, would they have taken such care of us? This is my third day here and they've fed me liberally—not lavishly mind, but sufficient is as good as a feast. Also, when they brought you in here I found that they'd tied a cloth about your head to protect you from sunstroke . . . otherwise you'd never be talking to me now. Why all the precautions against our dying if they want to kill us?"

Alec was thoughtful for a moment, for a grim answer to the question had darted to his mind. He hesitated a moment, and then:

"Torture?" he suggested, and his voice was hard.

Valais was silent, and then slowly he nodded his head.

"Yes," he said, "there is that . . . but I've been scouting the thought . . . trying to give my host the benefit of the doubt."

Both were silent for a little while and then, as though shaking away the darkness that had entered the room as Alec spoke his thought, Valais thrust his hand into his pocket and found his case.

"Cigarette?" he said.

Gratefully Alec took one, and in a silence which the tobacco made soothing, the two men smoked.

It had been late afternoon when Alec joined his friend in the whitewashed prison, and in a very little while the sun sank below the horizon and night had fallen. To the two men seated within the room, however, the darkness was pleasing, helped them to forget for a little the place in which they were, to allow their thoughts to range upon other and happier scenes wherein both had played their part. After a while Valais began to talk, to recall many a stirring event which had figured in his past. He was an entertaining talker and it was not long before Alec became entirely engrossed in his recountal; so engrossed, indeed, that it was with a surprised jerk back to the unpleasant realities of the moment that he remembered their plight as suddenly the door was flung open and a man stood upon the threshold, and said two words:

"Follow me."

Confused by the suddenness of the summons, the two friends arose and groped their way stumblingly across the room towards the light which streamed in from the passage. Three other men were stationed outside, and without a moment's pause these fell into line beside the prisoners, and at once the little procession moved along the corridor. Down some steps they went, along another corridor, and then the man in front halted before an imposing wooden door. Softly he rapped upon it; there came an instant command to enter, and in another moment the door had opened and they all filed into the room.

Stupefied, the two white men paused and stared around them, unable utterly to believe the actuality of what they saw.

In some vague way they had expected luxury, a riot of Eastern magnificence, of costly taste, for they were obviously being led to an interview perhaps with the man they feared and dreaded. Silken hangings of wondrous hue, priceless rugs, exquisite vases . . . all these might well have been there, and had they been neither man would have found anything to marvel at in the fact. But no such exotic rarities were gathered in that room. Yet it was not their absence which now caused both men to stare involuntarily around in a gasp of startled admiration. For the furnishing was incredible: marvellous it would have been in almost any setting, but placed as it was in that house in the heart of Brazil, its strangeness became preposterous, bizarre.

Vast, and lit electrically with the most modern shaded lights, there was no part of the room which did not dumbfound expectation. Everything—chairs, table, desk, carpet—was in the most ultra-modern of design. Chromium-plated steel formed the legs of stripped oak chairs and table: a radio gramophone of the latest make stood in one corner, and near it was set a case of fictitious books, one door of which lay open, allowing a glimpse of cocktail glasses and a myriad bottles within. Every article of furniture seemed to act a dual purpose, for into the sides of the chairs were cleverly built shelves lined with books, while the bottom of a superb enamel clock formed a cabinet of files.

The whole atmosphere was one of orderly and luxurious taste, eminently adapted to the needs of a tropical climate, for space and light were predominant. Only a mind nurtured upon the most progressive culture of the West could ever have conceived and furnished such a room, and the two Europeans, as they glimpsed this fact, were forcibly impressed.

For a moment or two the atmosphere of the place held them, made them forget—a fact they would have believed incredible in such grim circumstances—the reason for which they were there. But even as their amazed regard encircled the room, coming to rest at last upon an alcove set back in the wall facing the door, a voice spoke suddenly in curt command, and on the instant the men surrounding them stiffened to attention and with one accord moved towards the door and from the room.

And then a strange thing happened. For again the voice spoke, but this time in that cultured English diction whose home is Oxford.

"Will you kindly take a few steps forward," it said, but although the words were mild enough there was an unmistakable note of authority in the way they were spoken.

The two friends glanced swiftly at each other and then towards the alcove whence the voice had come. There was a quality of unexpectedness about this reception which appealed to neither. The instinctive knowledge that, although unable themselves to observe, yet were they being treated to the strictest scrutiny, was not a pleasant one, and eagerly almost they moved forward in answer to the summons.

"Stop!"

Again the voice commanded: again they obeyed. For what seemed to last a considerable length of time but in reality must have been but two or three minutes, they remained motionless, staring unhappily before them at their own reflections in a mirror. For the alcove was set back to a depth of perhaps five feet and ended in an enormous sheet of glass. Immediately to the right of this another alcove branched off, and both men had an unpleasant feeling that someone seated within this second alcove was now observing their every movement through the glass beside him, studying with ruthless thoroughness every detail of their persons. The thought was nerve-racking, and after the first moment Alec fell to fidgeting with his hands, but throughout the ordeal Tony Valais remained unmoved.

At last, however, it was over. Suddenly, although into the silence of the room there had come no sound of any movement, their own reflections in the mirror became obscured by the figure of a man who had emerged from the second alcove. Slowly, steadily he moved towards them, his eyes staring at them fixedly from beneath hooded lids. And on the instant Alec ceased to fidget, becoming as tense and still as Valais beside him. For this man who approached so silently, with light, stealthy tread, had held so great a part in their thoughts throughout the past four years that even now when they knew they stood before him, the fact seemed incredible, a nightmare vision quite divorced from actuality. With faces vital with interest the two white men awaited his approach.

He was not very tall, perhaps five foot six or seven, but so perfectly was he proportioned that his presence was commanding. He moved with the easy grace of a true Brazilian, a grace inherited from the many diverse nationalities which the centuries have blended together into one conglomerate whole. Indians, negroes, Japanese, Syrians, Europeans—all had combined to form his ancestry and subtly was he invested with a mingling of their individual racial characteristics. Of a brown, olive rather than swarthy, his skin seemed but a fitting setting for the eyes, very dark, very haughty and deeply intelligent, which stared so remorselessly at the men before him: magnetic eyes they were, hypnotic almost, and Alec Graeme found himself quite powerless to sustain their gaze. Black hair brushed back firmly from a massive forehead, prominent thick lips betraying negro blood, a long, very aquiline nose and big, determined chin made up a face vivid with power and thought, a face handsome because of its distinction, yet one in which a certain sinister quality, an inhuman ruthlessness, disturbed profoundly.

It was difficult to guess at his age: in such climates men mature rapidly—thirty, thirty-five, forty—any of these he might well have been, but Tony Valais, who had lived long enough in Brazil to compute an age correctly, set him down at nearly forty, in due allowance for years spent much in Europe. For much in Europe the man must have been, as apart from the distinctive culture of his voice, there was about his whole appearance the unmistakable touch of European taste. His clothes, although of cream-coloured silk suitable for the tropics, were of that faultless cut of which a London tailor alone is capable, his shoes and linen very plain and neat, while his tie bore the colours of a well-known London club. There was about his whole person no slightest touch of that love for gaudy finery which the untravelled Brazilian counts as elegance.

European in taste and attire, Brazilian in mind and thought, the man was a dangerous combination, a dynamite fusion of two cultures directly opposed, which a spark of any sort might easily ignite to explosion. The wildness of the country was in his very blood; his soul secret and mysterious as those miles of tropical forests which covered the land; his thoughts cunning and deadly as the giant cats that infested them, as evil and fraught with malice as the poisonous snakes that crawled in the undergrowth. A jungle dark and sinister, with smouldering passions which might kindle to conflagration at any moment—this was his mind: and over it all, superimposed like a thin coating of ice above a dangerous swirl of water, was that layer of European culture, a layer which hid beneath the suavity and ease of gentlemanly breeding the harsh violence of implacable hate. Some time, somewhere—Tony Valais, quick in perception, glimpsed the fact clearly—this man must have been deeply angered; the passions in his soul had needed no further spark to kindle them into flame, and all those dormant beasts which had lurked so secretly within the jungle of his mind had awakened from slumber eager to attack.

But if all this could be gathered in the short glimpse which was possible to the two captives before the Brazilian spoke, the change in him as he said the words gave them for a moment—but for a moment only—a feeling of security. He seemed with perfect ease to convey so completely the host, that they forgot the strange and perilous position in which they really were, and could almost imagine themselves visitors to this obviously influential, obviously rich, obviously clever man.

" Please be seated."

He spoke in perfect English, in too perfect English almost, for as they had noted before his accent was that of Oxford rather than of London, and of Balliol rather than of other colleges. Evidently his command of the language was supreme, for he had no difficulty in selecting his words, which flowed from him with no arrest of any sort: yet his choice was somewhat finicky, rather the language of that particular type of sixth form boy who has no chance of getting his colours on the playing-fields.

" I am happy to welcome you to my home, unwilling though you may have been to visit me, but I hope in a few moments to be able to show to you that it is all for your ultimate benefit."

He smiled, and there was a certain attraction in that smile, although no more than the pleasant words could it entirely conceal the menace which the man seemed to effuse.

" How long, Captain Graeme," he said suddenly, turning to Alec, who with his friend had obeyed the command which had been issued in the form of that invitation, and had taken a chair on the other side of the desk to which the Brazilian had moved, " have you been in this country? "

" Four years," said Alec promptly.

" And you, Mr. Valais? "

" This time? " queried Tony nonchalantly—" on this visit? "

" Yes."

" About four years too."

" But you have been here before, of course? "

" Several times," said Tony.

" On commissions on behalf of the French Government? "

" Once or twice."

" Which you have hitherto always brought to a successful conclusion."

Tony bowed.

" Thank you," he said, " that is so."

" You will notice," said the Brazilian quietly, smiling again and showing a very even set of brilliant white teeth, " that I have used the word ' hitherto,' because I fear me I cannot truthfully describe your activities during the past four years as entirely successful."

" Oh! " said Tony quickly. " It was my impression that the very reason for my presence here is the success of my work."

" You don't deny, then," said the Brazilian, " that this also is a commission from the French Government? "

Tony Valais did not hesitate.

" I do most emphatically deny that," he said. " I am not here at the behest of my Government."

" Oh, I was under the impression——"

But Tony interrupted him.

" Whereas it would be perfectly true," he said, " if you were to claim that the French Government suggested to me the undertaking which I accepted four years ago, it is entirely untrue to state that I am in the employment of the French Government for the moment, or have been for any part of the last four years."

"You are on licence, in fact, lent, shall we say, by your Government to that of this country?"

"That," acknowledged Tony quietly, "would be much nearer the truth."

The Brazilian turned abruptly to the Scotsman.

"And you, Captain Graeme?"

Alec looked at him, held his eyes, and although it was with a great effort, he did not flinch.

"Come," said the Brazilian, "you understand what I mean. You are in the employ of the British Government."

"I am not," said Alec quietly.

"You also, then, are lent by your Government to that of this country?"

Alec turned and cast a fleeting smile at Tony Valais.

"That," he said, "would be a much better description."

"I thank you, gentlemen," said the Brazilian, after a moment's pause, "for your frankness in this matter. Maybe that frankness was inspired by the fact that you knew nothing else would pay . . . that you knew, perhaps, I also had the knowledge of all that you have admitted. But you also have a certain knowledge about me, a knowledge which has become considerably greater in the last four years. You are aware of my identity, both as Joseph Alvares, educated at Oxford and of Brazilian nationality, and also as Don Jose, a power to be reckoned with outside Rio de Janeiro."

He bowed.

For one moment, in spite of the plight in which he found himself, Alec Graeme nearly laughed: the action struck him as being so very theatrical.

"You have discovered," continued the Brazilian, "certain things about the activities—shall we call them business activities—in which I have been engaged throughout the years since I left Oxford: in fact it was directly due to these activities that you received instructions to proceed to Brazil. Am I right so far?"

Neither Alec nor Tony verbally admitted the truth of his remarks, but both men nodded.

"Good. These activities have been extremely profitable to myself." He suddenly looked up and smiled. "You must understand, gentlemen, that we are having a very heart-to-heart talk, and that what I am saying I will not acknowledge outside these four walls to anyone else, but there seems to me no point in hiding anything between us three . . . we know so much about each other."

He paused and lit a cigarette, then with a murmured word of apology, as though he had momentarily forgotten his duties as host, he offered his case in turn to Alec and to Tony. Both gratefully accepted the proferred cigarette, for they had long since exhausted their own supply and were only too happy to take advantage of the privilege accorded.

"On the other hand, in order to correct any misapprehensions which may exist, it will be better, I think, if I continue outlining a little longer. You may wonder, perhaps, in view of the fact that I had no small private income of my own, why I indulged in the somewhat, shall we say, irregular methods in which I have indulged in order to increase my capital. It may interest you to know that when at Oxford I fell in love with one of your most attractive English ladies. She was all that I thought a girl should be. She had great beauty, she had great charm, and she seemed, at any rate during our first few meetings, to have no particular aversion for me; in fact, if anything, rather the reverse. But when I came to press my suit, when I came to declare my love "—his voice took on a new note, a note of bitter hatred which both Europeans were quick to remark—" I was told that I was but a dago . . . a fit person, because of my money, to be allowed to entertain lavishly, but no fit person to receive anything but a passing favour, and that only in order that my entertainment should continue. I came back to Brazil, gentlemen, an embittered man, determined that I would get my own back, and determined also in a theory of life which I have found, in the years that have since passed, no necessity to revise. If you have money you can do a great deal—with the money that I had I was able to entertain a most charming and attractive lady—but if you have a great deal of money you can do more. Had I been a millionaire I could have married her. Money, gentlemen, will buy anything."

He paused, and it was noticeable to both his listeners that he was expounding a theory of life as to the truth of which he was convinced, that he was stating, in fact, that creed which was the basis of his every action.

"Money," he repeated with great emphasis, "will buy everything, gentlemen, whether it be a human form in silks and satins or whether it be the choicest wines in the choicest cellars, whether it be happiness of mind . . ."

Abruptly he extinguished the cigarette, which was only half-smoked: suddenly he withdrew from his pocket the gold and platinum cigarette-case which contained his supply: with nervous, jerky movements he took a cigarette, lit it and replaced the case back in his pocket. Then he looked up and his eyes sought those of Graeme.

"Yes, Captain Graeme." He glanced at the Frenchman. "Yes, Mr. Valais, happiness of mind as well. I am completely happy. My activities have brought to me undreamed-of wealth. I am the most influential man in South America already. I am going to be the greatest man in the world. *Power*—that is my ambition now. Power . . . and money begets power."

For a long moment he paused, and neither of his two listeners dared to break the silence. He remained quite still, staring at a point on the wall behind them, staring thoughtfully, obviously unaware of his surroundings, lost in a world created by his own imagination. There was something almost attractive about him at that moment, something far more appealing than the impression given by his general appearance when first they had seen him. Undoubtedly there was great power in the man, and his personality awed the two Europeans. But always there remained that impression of menace. The power he radiated was no pleasant thing. Graeme, who during his career had had opportunities for meeting all the great personalities of the time, felt that here was the greatest of them all, but here also was one who had no redeeming feature. He lived for power: he existed for power: his happiness lay only in power. But not the power to do good . . . the power to crush beneath his heel all who dared to contest his might.

But just as suddenly as Alvares had worked himself up into this exposition of the basic creed of his life, so did he resume his normal urbanity.

"I beg your pardon, gentlemen," he said quietly, but his voice retained that glint of steel which promised danger. "I should not bother you with these things, which are, after all, only my own theories of life. Possibly power does not interest either of you. I cannot, in fact, believe that it does, since both of you are in subordinate positions. No man who believes in power, in his own power, could fail to make use of it. Both of you, I will agree, are excellent servants to those who employ you . . . more than excellent servants, for you show initiative, courage and loyalty—three things which I should like to demand from all those whom I myself employ. These very qualities have enabled you to obtain that knowledge of my activities, the result of which I have been bound to take steps to avoid. And it is the lack of those qualities in those who are employed by me which has resulted in your being able to achieve your object. But I would point out one thing. A man has more power if he relies on no subordinates. Let me tell you that I rely on none whom I employ. I rely only on myself and my wealth. My creed, as I have told you, is that money will buy everything. It has certainly bought the service of several very clever men who have worked for me. Your chief difficulty in making your investigations on behalf of the Brazilian Government has been that from the moment you obtained a likely witness against me I knew about it. Money obtained that knowledge. I destroyed your evidence."

He laughed harshly and the sound sickened the heart of Alec Graeme, for he knew only too well the grim truth that lay behind the words. Time and again they had secured a man who could speak dangerously of the activities of this rogue; time and again that man had disappeared, only to be found later the victim of a violent death, but always a death which could not be explained, a murder which remained for ever unavenged.

"Money did that. Finally, after four years, you have obtained sufficient evidence against me to go to that gentleman of my own nationality, a high minister in the Government of this country, and to lay your facts before him, facts which would undoubtedly have brought me to a serious pass. I would like to make it clear, however, that I do not acknowledge that your activities could have done more against me than to necessitate my expending more of my wealth in getting myself out of what, after all, would only have amounted to an impasse. The courts of the world are open to the voice of money. Believe that or believe it not, as you like, but I tell you that it is true. I would not have been convicted."

"It depends," struck in Tony Valais suddenly, in a perfectly even voice which Alec could not but admire in the circumstances, particularly after this preposterous statement, "it depends entirely on what part of the world you are speaking about."

The Brazilian pursed his lips, but smiled. He bowed.

"As you will," he said, "I think I have mentioned that you are loyal. But the fact remains that I had no particular desire to expend that money if a cheaper method could achieve the same result. I have found the minister more amenable than the courts might have been. I have here two letters, one addressed to each of you. I should like you to peruse them."

He rose from his seat behind the desk, advanced around it and handed to each of his guests an envelope.

Alec turned to Tony. Tony nodded slightly. They both opened the missives that were addressed to them. In perfectly clear terms the man who held a most responsible position in the Government of the country informed them that their services were no longer required, and enclosed a cheque for a large amount.

" Those cheques," said Alvares, who had returned to his seat, " will be met. You need have no fear of that."

He paused. He sat back in his chair. He extinguished the stub of his cigarette. He folded his hands and seemed to relapse into a coma.

Alec Graeme looked at his friend. He had no idea how to act, what to say. Tony looked back at him and in the cool eyes of the elder man Alec found courage.

" There is no proof," he said, " that these letters are genuine."

The Brazilian leant forward.

" Not as yet," he remarked, " but when I find it convenient to liberate you from this place—which I trust you are not finding too uncomfortable, for I fear it will be necessary to keep you here just a little longer—you have only to apply to the person himself to receive confirmation of what I have told you. You have only to present those cheques to find that they are genuine, and that they will be honoured by the bank. But I might suggest to you that at the moment you are in no position to argue with me as to the authenticity or otherwise of those letters. You know the signature of your employer, don't you? "

Tony glanced at the letter in his hand, then glanced up again.

" It is easy for some to make an excellent forgery," he remarked.

The insult passed unnoticed.

"Perfectly!" Alvares smiled. "But I tell you it is not so. That is no forgery, and it will be easy for you to put it to the test when you return to Rio."

For a moment Alec hesitated, then he broke into the conversation, and when he spoke he strove his utmost to keep his voice steady.

"When I was brought here," he said, "I did not expect to leave it alive. You see, Don Jose, I have had experience of your methods in the past."

"Alas!" said the Brazilian, "whereas it is a fairly safe matter to dispose of certain Indians, certain natives of various little-known parts of Brazil, even, in extreme cases, of certain pure-blooded Brazilians themselves, it is less easy—because of your Government and that of France—to destroy one of their subjects. It can be done, of course, but I see no particular reason to do so. You and your friend have done me no great harm. Some time or other it would obviously have been necessary for me to transfer my activities elsewhere, and I count myself lucky that for four years I have been able to continue perfectly unmolested. You must excuse my making this remark, but you must agree that if you look back on your four years' activities in Brazil, you have done very little to annoy me."

Alec flushed with anger, but out of the corner of his eye he caught a warning movement from his friend.

"Besides," the Brazilian continued quietly, "there is no need for me to worry very much: you see, part of my contract with your erstwhile employer is a promise to cease making money in the method in which I have previously done so, at least in Brazil. It may surprise you to hear that I have certain patriotic feelings. I should dislike to interfere with the welfare of my country any more than I have done, particularly now that it is bled white."

He laughed, and once again the menace in that laugh struck a chill through the two listeners.

" I do not intend to punish either of you for interfering with my activities: in fact, since your interference has been so entirely negligible I propose to reward you, as you shall hear in a moment. But I cannot let you go unmolested back to your own country just for a little while. You are aware, no doubt, of the reason for this. The work which has been progressing so satisfactorily on the greatest bridge the world has ever seen, erected at huge cost, is about to suffer a slight set-back, just before the date of its completion. We will not discuss the exact date arranged, but for three weeks, just in case you should become mischievous again and go, perhaps, to some other quarter, acting under a mistaken sense of duty, you will, I am afraid, continue to be my guests in this rather primitive home of mine. But I will do all that I can to make you comfortable, and I have a suggestion to make to both of you. You have been rewarded for your work in the last four years according to the scale of pay which you arranged with your employer, but since it is necessary for me to delay your return to your own countries, and possibly to prevent the ultimate success of your work, I feel that your activities in the past four years should not go unrewarded by me also. There will be a slight formality about it, for if you take this money—which I propose offering you—from this place, well then, you must promise me that my activities up to the present moment will no longer interest you, will, in fact, have been forgotten . . . banished from your minds. Are you agreeable? "

Alec flushed angrily again. Here was this man, probably the greatest rogue as yet untouched, gloating over their failure to outwit him, offering them a bribe to keep their mouths shut. But Tony Valais, noticing, perhaps, the attitude of his friend, rushed into words.

" What do you propose to give us? " he asked.

The question startled Alec Graeme and he looked at his friend in quick inquiry. But Tony was staring straight at the Brazilian before him and apparently unaware of Alec's existence. For a moment the latter was on the point of bursting into indignant speech, of disassociating himself forcibly from the significance of Tony's question, but at once he checked himself. Alec Graeme knew too well the true worth of his friend, the unswerving integrity of his every thought, to doubt him for one moment, and after the first shock of surprise he realized immediately that some very good reason must have prompted him to accept so casually, so precipitately almost, the abominable offer made to them.

" Let me see," said the Brazilian quietly, " you have been in this country four years, for which work you have been paid adequately, I think, by my friend the minister. But you are to spend three weeks longer in this country than you need have. I admit that after four years, to a European, Brazil is not the Brazil of his dreams before he saw it. In these circumstances, and as I am unwilling that you should suffer in any way more than is necessary"—he smiled, and again those white teeth flashed—"I suggest that perhaps a thousand pounds for every week that you are delayed . . . three weeks . . . three thousand pounds . . . that sum to each of you?"

For a moment Valais remained silent.

"Of course," went on Alvares quickly, "I will arrange for your transport first class to England and to France respectively, and will see that you have all the comfort on your homeward journey that you could possibly require."

"Very well," said Valais suddenly. "I accept."

"And you?"

Alec realized that he was being addressed. He cast a quick glance towards Tony Valais, but the latter was leaning back in his chair, apparently quite unaffected by the treachery of which he had just been guilty. It was on the tip of Alec's tongue to burst into a tirade of speech, to denounce both his erstwhile friend (for now he quite failed to understand Valais, and felt there could be no possible explanation for such vile behaviour) and the man who held them captive, when out of the corner of his eye suddenly he noticed that Tony's forefinger was tapping the arm of his chair. Alec did not dare to look directly at him, but he could hear just enough to realize that a message was being spelt out to him in Morse. Dash-dot-dash-dash-dot-dot-dot-dot . . . apparently entirely unconcerned, Valais had spelt out the word "Yes."

"Come, come," said the Brazilian suddenly, "I can't wait any longer. I have already waited long enough for both of you. I am treating you well, treating you very well indeed. What is your decision, Captain Graeme?"

"I accept," said Alec quietly.

For a moment none of the three said a word. Both the Europeans stared at the Brazilian, who was now leaning back in his chair, his eyes half-closed, a satisfied smile around his lips. When he did speak he said only four words, and they were so low that Alec Graeme, who was the nearer, could only just catch them.

"Money will buy everything!"

Alvares rose to his feet.

"As I will not see you again," he said slowly, "and as I do not care to trust any man more than I need, I will present you with your reward now."

He opened a drawer in his desk and withdrew two envelopes.

"You see," he said, "I had it all prepared, for I knew the value, the power of my argument."

He handed an envelope to both captives, each of whom had now risen to his feet.

"For three weeks," he said, "I am afraid that you will be kept here, but all that I can do will be done for you, and if you require anything you have but to send me a message. The deficiency will be supplied if the resources of my humble home contain it. At the end of three weeks you will be conveyed to the coast as comfortably as possible, although I am afraid it will be a long ride. There you will be embarked for home, and I trust that you will carry away from Brazil pleasant memories, not only of the country but also of Don Jose Alvares."

He bowed.

The two Europeans suddenly became aware that a man was standing behind each of them, although they had no idea as to how any message had been conveyed summoning them. With a gentle nod of their heads the two men, who had formed part of their guard when they had been led from the cell to that room earlier in the evening, motioned towards the door. With a last glance towards the smiling Brazilian, the two friends followed the Indians from the room, back along the passage, up the steps, and along the corridor to the cell they had occupied before. In a very little time they were within and a key was turning in the lock. An oil-lamp was now standing upon the rickety little table, and by its light Alec could see the gaunt outlines of his friend's hatchet face. To his surprise he realized that Valais was smiling, smiling craftily, and as he sensed the fact his own heart lightened.

"Who was the girl?" suddenly asked Tony.

"What girl?"

"Good Lord, didn't you see her?" Tony laughed quietly. "I believe, my good Alec, that what they say is right: a Frenchman would notice a pretty face or slim waist even as he mounted a scaffold!"

FOUR

THAT evening the quality of the food supplied to the two prisoners definitely improved, and instead of the usual caraffe of water a bottle of rather sweet Brazilian wine had been substituted. This, although not quite to the palate of either the Scot or the Frenchman, was, nevertheless, a welcome change, and still better was the arrival of a box of large black cigars, brought to them at the completion of their repast.

Alec Graeme felt extremely worried about the bargain which had been struck with the Brazilian, but he had not as yet discussed the matter with his friend, for there was something in the other's attitude revealing that he was deep in thought and at the moment disinclined for any interruption. It was not, in fact, until the cigar which Valais had lighted with due care had been half-smoked that he himself started the conversation.

" Alec," he said, " you don't think much of me at the moment, do you? "

Graeme smiled.

" Tony, I don't understand you . . . that's all."

Valais made a mock bow.

"Thank you," he said. "I appreciate that faith in our friendship, that faith in my honesty. Cast your mind back to our conversation with that little brute upstairs, Alec."

"Did you say 'brute'?" asked Alec.

Tony looked up, his eyebrows raised.

"Yes."

"What? Even after these cigars?"

Tony laughed.

"Even after these cigars."

"I can remember nearly everything he said," remarked Alec, "but I am not quite sure I know the exact words. Why?"

"Ah!" said Tony, "but it is in the exact words that this thing becomes so important. He made us an offer."

For a second a frown darkened the face of Alec Graeme.

"Yes . . . which we accepted."

"As far as I remember," said Valais, "the offer was in these terms. That we should each be rewarded at a fabulous rate, if I may say so, for the extra weeks which we are about to remain in this hole, in return for our promise that we would not take the money from this place unless our interest in his activities up to the present should cease immediately. The whole point, my friend Alec, lies in the wording."

For a moment Alec Graeme pondered upon his friend's words.

"I don't think I understand you," he said at last.

"The important words," said Tony Valais, with a smile, "are three, and they are . . . '*from this place.*' If we do not remove the money with us when we go we are under no obligation to him whatsoever. We need not even return it to him. We are guilty of no breach of good behaviour."

Graeme looked at Valais for a moment and then he laughed.

"Rather twisting his words to suit our purpose!"

"And why not?" said Valais deliberately. "I don't deny that fact, but when you are trading with a man devoid of honesty, without any loyalty, a man whose acknowledged thesis of life is that money will buy everything . . . well, then, I don't think we need be too particular. Provided we don't remove the money we've committed ourselves to nothing."

Alec Graeme puffed at his cigar for a moment in silence.

"I agree with you," he said finally. "I don't think we need be too punctilious on this matter, but I don't see how it helps us, Tony. What are we going to do about it, after all?"

"There's a good deal," said Valais deliberately, "in what our host believes. He says that money will buy everything. Not *quite* everything"—he smiled towards his friend—"because, after all, it has not bought *us*. But his many employees are probably accustomed to being treated in exactly the same way as we have been treated, and no doubt he pays them well . . . but you mustn't forget, Alec, that we have a large sum of money with which we also can pay them well."

The germ of the idea flashed to Alec Graeme.

" You mean that we should bribe our way out? "

" Yes." Valais smiled. " Bribe our way out with that money which has been supplied to us . . . with his own money, in fact. Rather a nice suggestion of poetic justice! "

Graeme leant forward excitedly.

" But how could we do it? "

" I don't know." Valais smiled again. " Don't let's be over-eager and thus spoil our plans. I think you had better leave it to me, Alec. I'll think this matter out. We've got three weeks, after all, in which to do it."

" Have we? "

Valais looked at his friend.

" Yes. Why not? "

" We've only got a few days . . . a few hours, perhaps," said Graeme quietly. " The shorter the time the better. If we don't get to Rio quickly we can't prevent the crash at the bridge."

Valais shook his head.

" I'm afraid, old man," he said slowly, " it wouldn't be much use if we got away and did give the warning. There's no doubt in my mind at all that those letters which we've received from our "—he pursed his lips—" employer, were genuine enough. Those cheques which we have now in our pockets will be met. Don Jose has got hold of him all right. In that case, nothing that we can do will prevent the smash. But we will, of course, attempt to get away as soon as possible."

They relapsed into silence after that, and it was not, in fact, until they had turned in for the night that Graeme suddenly voiced his thoughts to his friend.

"If we can do no good," he said quietly, "what's the point in our trying to escape at all? Why shouldn't we just send the money back to Don Jose when we have both returned peacefully to our own countries?"

"And have our lips sealed for ever?" Valais laughed. "No, my friend, you yourself said you didn't wish to do that very thing. We can't take the money *from* this place. Those are the important words."

"But why shouldn't our lips be sealed? After all, you've just said yourself that you think we can do no good."

"No good, perhaps, with this present Government, but we can be of great use to our own Governments when we return, if we can give a detailed report of the exact state of affairs. Don't you see that?"

"Yes." Alec Graeme spoke doubtfully. "Yes . . . I see that all right, but I don't see that it makes much difference. It's only a play on the words, after all."

"But," said Valais quietly, "a most important play on the words as far as we are concerned. It enables us to get away with a free conscience to do our utmost to down this fellow, even if we personally take no further part in the procedure."

They relapsed into silence again, but in a little while Valais's voice came through the darkness.

" Alec," he said, " what the hell do you think he'd do if we just returned the money to him on the day we left here? Do you think we'd ever leave? Not on your life. He wouldn't dare to let us go free to say what we like about him . . . he relies on our well-known honesty "—he laughed—" that in accepting the bribe we have sealed our lips. That we've found a way out was only due to his own careless wording. No, Alec, we've got to get away ourselves . . . and using the same means with which he proposes to keep us silent."

" What chance have we of getting away? " suddenly asked Alec. " I'm sorry for being such a pessimist, Tony, but you know how easily those Indians rounded us up, and we must be miles from anywhere here . . . we don't even know where we are."

Alec Graeme waited anxiously for his friend's reply, but for a few moments it did not come: then suddenly he heard the deep tones of the Frenchman's voice.

" That is what is worrying me, but leave it to me. Let me think this thing out. Good night, old friend."

" Good night."

It was late on the following morning that the two friends awoke from the deep slumber into which they had sunk very shortly after the last words of their conversation on the previous evening. Possibly the reaction from the probability of imminent death had been greater than they had anticipated, for the sun was streaming in through the little barred window set at the top of their prison room, and the attendant who had evidently been detailed to look after their wants was already in the room with their breakfast. For the first time also they were provided with their razors and water with which to bathe themselves. A very much fresher looking pair finally seated themselves at the table to consume the excellent coffee and food which had been supplied.

Tony Valais started conversation with the warder, but as he was speaking in a language of which Graeme had little knowledge he could scarcely follow their talk. From the few snatches which he could understand, however, it was clear that Valais was very tentatively endeavouring to trap the other into some disclosure regarding the locality of this strange homestead. But the man seemed to be very much on his guard, for although he remained perfectly polite, even excessively so, in the manner of the true Brazilian, it was obvious from the expression on Valais's face the moment he had left that the Frenchman had been able to glean nothing from him.

They passed the rest of the morning in rather unhappy contemplation of the walls of their room. They did not talk much for there was little to talk about. Valais seemed to be distrait and very much occupied with his own thoughts, and it was a welcome relief when at last the warder returned with the midday meal. He brought with him, however, not merely the food but also a surprise in the shape of a note which he handed to Alec Graeme. This, couched in characteristic words, proved to be an invitation from the Brazilian to a game of golf that evening.

"Golf?" said Graeme, bewildered.

"What did you say?" asked Valais.

Graeme laughed and tossed across the note.

"What do you make of that?" he said.

Tony Valais read it through quickly and then looked up at his friend.

"Exercise," he remarked. "We're going to be provided with exercise. Isn't that grand?"

"Yes," said Graeme, "but *golf* . . . look what he says . . . a game of *golf*!"

"Is it possible," said Tony quietly, "that he has heard of your prowess on the courses of Scotland?"

Graeme laughed.

"Don't be silly," he said. "Anyway, what shall I do about it?"

"Why . . . accept, of course," said Valais. "Do you want to see only the inside of this cell for three weeks, or do you want to get the opportunity for a little fresh air?"

"There's a catch in this," said Graeme, shaking his head. "God knows what, but there is one. You don't play golf in the jungles of Brazil."

"I know I don't," said Valais. "I've never handled a golf-club in my life. But you do . . . so be quick and accept."

Graeme, shrugging his shoulders, wrote a short note on the back of the letter, with a pencil provided by the warder. The latter retired.

It was with feelings of acute curiosity that the two friends awaited the appointed hour, and in the cool of the evening they were visited by another Brazilian of a rather different type from that of the man who normally acted as their warder. He carried a light bag of a modern kind, complete with a few golf-clubs. This he handed to Valais without a word. He carried also, very demonstratively, an enormous revolver which he tapped significantly. He then suggested curtly that the two captives should follow him.

This they did, and they were led through a long passage to a door which opened on to the outside world, where they found Don Jose waiting for them, a man also fully armed standing by his side with a bag of golf-clubs over his shoulder. Don Jose bowed ceremoniously.

" I am delighted to have the opportunity of showing my little course to such a well-known golfer," he said. " Your feats, Captain Graeme, interested me when I was at Oxford, and when I was doing my feeble best to master this game which comes from your country. You see, I do not make the usual mistake of suggesting to a Scotsman that it originated in Holland ! "

" That," said Tony Valais, " is true Brazilian courtesy."

Alvares looked at him for a moment: evidently he was not quite certain whether the words were spoken cynically or not, but the Frenchman had a pleasant smile on his face and Alvares finally decided to ignore any insult that might have been implied. He bowed again and led the way.

They moved along a rough path which apparently skirted the outside walls of the courtyard which surrounded the house. Both Europeans cast curious glances around, but the walls were high and they could see very little of the place of their captivity. The path descended abruptly to a tangled mass of trees which lay to the right of the house, and once within this wilderness they could see nothing but the path before them. For five minutes or so they walked in single file, until at last they reached the edge of what appeared to be a natural clearing. But a single glance at its formation, at the artificial evenness of the fairway, the exactness of the sanded bunkers told Alec Graeme that here was one part of the jungle man had claimed from nature, and he marvelled at the feat. A golf-course cut clean from Brazilian jungle . . . the idea was preposterous, insane, and he could not but admire the colossal enterprise of the man whose brain had demanded it. It was set almost in a valley, and surrounded by jungle trees and great rocks of a curious greyish colour which added a note of sinister grandeur to the utter strangeness of the scene. Actually it was only a one-hole course, but its formation was perfect—a state of affairs difficult to attain anywhere, but here in the wilds of Brazil the thing was a miracle.

For a long moment the two Europeans remained silent: the sight had awed them. Smilingly the Brazilian watched them, and then he turned to Alec.

"I'm afraid there is only this hole, but I have two tees and two greens. We play backwards and forwards over the same fairway. As you are conceding me a stroke a hole will you please take the honour?"

Ordinarily Alec Graeme would have felt surprise at this display of knowledge on the part of the Brazilian, but after the shock of seeing this perfect little golf-course in the heart of Brazil he felt that nothing further could ever surprise or shock him again in this world. Without a word he took a practise swing and teed up the ball provided to him. It certainly was a joy to be wielding a golf-club once more after all these months when sterner things had occupied his mind so utterly. He swung at the ball and was somewhat surprised to feel the impact well in the middle of the club, and to see the ball soaring away for a good distance perfectly straight down the fairway. From that moment onwards Alec Graeme thrust away all thought of the actual position in which he was and, apparently, the Brazilian did likewise, for the pair chatted together cheerily about golf and golfers generally as they played their match, which was a very close one. True, it was a strange golf-match, perhaps the strangest ever played, for Tony Valais caddied for his friend and behind or alongside them, always very near, followed the armed guardian alert for any sign of treachery, his fingers never distant from the butt of his revolver. But his attitude caused Tony Valais a great deal of amusement: it was so obvious that he regarded the efforts both of his master and of his master's captive as the actions of born lunatics, and occasionally he gave vent to expressions of surprise when it came about, as it frequently did, that a shot was missed. This was in no way derogatory to the skill of either of the players, for the greens could not be described as greens at all when compared with those of even the worst golf-courses. Yet the exercise was there and a great deal of fun, for the Brazilian was no mean opponent.

Watching the two playing, Tony Valais also found great fun, for he, more than any of them, could appreciate to the full the bizarre strangeness of this extraordinary golf-match. The actual game did not interest him and he was, therefore, not concerned with the individual shots. As they moved across to the far side of the course the Brazilian's ball landed in a bunker, and for a moment Tony watched his efforts to extract it; only for a moment, however, and then again he stared about him . . . and for one fleeting second his heart stood still. For the trees around were very sparse in this part of the course, and through their branches he had caught a glimpse of swiftly running water. *A river!* Even as he glimpsed it tremendous possibilities rushed to Tony's mind, but his face remained just as wooden, just as imperturbable, as casually he walked over nearer to the trees and stared cautiously before him. He could see it clearly now . . . and a dangerous swirl of water it looked, rushing at terrific speed between steep banks, thickly wooded. For a second more he gazed, and then, casually as he had approached, he returned once more to the bunker and, with excited thoughts racing madly through his brain, continued to watch the Brazilian's efforts. At last the ball was out, and they commenced the return across the course.

Rather to his surprise Alec Graeme found himself playing very well indeed, but he needed to, for he won a ten-hole match backwards and forwards over this one fairway to the greens on opposite ends by one hole only. Darkness in Brazil comes rapidly, and although it was fairly light still when the last putt of that match was holed, yet it was practically dark by the time that the captives had been returned to their cell.

As they parted the Brazilian, in flattering terms, complimented Graeme upon his golf and requested the pleasure of a return match on the following evening. Alec Graeme readily agreed.

Once alone in their room Alec looked at his friend.

" Gosh ! " he said. " I've never played a game of golf in those conditions in my life before. What an amazing performance. I must say . . ."

But Valais had raised his hand, an imperious gesture, a gesture demanding silence.

" I've got it," he said. " Listen ! "

For a few seconds he remained in thought: then he smiled quietly.

"I do wish she'd been somewhere about! You've no idea how beautiful she is! However, perhaps to-morrow. Now, Alec my old, about this escaping business!"

FIVE

Although he had enjoined silence on his friend, the Frenchman did not immediately continue: instead he sat quite still, puffing at the strong tobacco of his Brazilian cigarette, a supply of which had been placed upon the rickety table in the middle of the room.

Alec Graeme knew better than to interrupt his thoughts, but it was with difficulty that he restrained the questions he longed to ask, for from the intent expression on the other's face he sensed that his friend was excited, that some cunning idea had leapt to his fertile brain. There was nothing to be done, however, except to content himself with the tobacco so kindly provided by Don Jose Alvares and wait in patience for Valais to speak, watching the other's eyes and striving to read in them the thoughts that filled his mind. But the Frenchman had a peculiar habit, when deep in thought, of half-closing his eyes: possibly he had adopted this trick as a protective measure during some of the earlier exploits which had made his name when in the service of the French Government, and behind the German lines during the war. It most effectively concealed from even the most intent observer any expression there might be in them, and prevented anyone from guessing at the trend of thought which ran through the mind behind.

For fully five minutes Tony Valais made no attempt to explain the significance of his remark: instead he remained quite motionless, except for the regular movements of his hand as he placed the cigarette between his lips and then removed it. Alec Graeme watched that hand, the graceful shape of it, watched the tapering fingers, and not for the first time he found himself almost fascinated. For his hand revealed so utterly the character of the man; it gave the impression of great power and strength, combined with breeding and high artistic intelligence—qualities manifest to those who had more than a passing acquaintance with Tony Valais.

Even as these thoughts were running through his mind the Frenchman looked up and spoke, and in the tone of his voice Alec at once sensed a hint of suppressed excitement, warning him that big things were to be discussed.

" Just how good are you at this game of golf? " asked Tony Valais quietly.

Alec Graeme smiled.

" There was a time," he said, " when I could do a lot with that little ball, but . . . it's a game which is a hard mistress. One demanding constant attention . . . and as you know, I haven't been able to give it that in the last few years."

" What I am getting at is this," said the Frenchman.

"Could you guarantee to hit the ball in any desired direction without appearing to do so?"

Alec looked at him in surprise.

"I don't follow you, Tony."

The other smiled back at him.

"I have explained myself badly. What I really mean is this. Supposing that our friend and host should hit his ball to the left side of the golf-course . . . could you guarantee to hit yours as far away from him as the prepared surface of the course admits, while still giving him the impression of trying your hardest to hit the ball straight down the middle?"

"Ah!"

The ejaculation escaped involuntarily from Alec Graeme: he realized that some clever plan for their escape was being fashioned within the other's brain, but up to the moment he had gathered no clue as to its nature.

"Yes, Tony. Supposing he hooked the ball . . . I'm sorry, supposing he hit the ball to the left-hand side of the course, then I could slice mine to the right. Yes, Tony; even now I think I could guarantee to do that."

"Good!" Tony's eyes flashed. "That's splendid. One further question. What is the correct place for a man to stand who is watching a golf shot being played?"

"Anywhere," said Alec promptly, "immediately to the right or left of the player, but not directly behind, and naturally"—he laughed—"not in front. You see," he continued with a smile on his face, interested in his subject, anxious to explain, as all golfers are anxious to explain about their game, " you see, if a person stands directly behind the player, out of the corner of his eye the latter can see him, and should he make the slightest movement it might distract from his shot."

" I see," said Valais. " I trust I did not inconvenience you this evening? "

Alec laughed.

" Of course not, Tony. In any case, we were only really ragging."

" I trust," said Tony Valais quietly, " that our guardian, who was so heavily armed and who took no trouble to conceal it, did not incommode you either? "

Again Alec laughed.

" My dear old lad, I couldn't possibly have made him understand that I didn't want him to stand in any particular position while I was playing a shot, even though I tried to for a month of Sundays. The only thing he might have assumed from any such objections on my part would have been that I desired him to make some treachery or other more easy for me."

" Exactly," said Tony Valais, " but I noticed that this gentleman we are discussing seemed to have a favourite place from which to watch you play your shots."

" Yes," said Alec, " once or twice he made me quite nervous. He was almost in the line of play."

"I think I am right," said Tony quietly, leaning back in his chair and puffing at his cigarette contentedly, "when I assume that our friend, Don Jose, was much too interested in his own game to pay very much attention to the antics of our watch-dog. I am inferring by this that he is unlikely, for two reasons, to instruct him as to the correct place for taking up his position while you are playing your shot. The first, that he is much too interested in his own game to notice; the second, that even if he did notice, so keen is he to win that he might think the man is likely to put you off and, therefore, would not tell him on purpose. We are quite likely to find to-morrow evening that our friend will be assuming similar positions during the course of the play. Now this is what I am getting at, Alec."

Tony Valais dropped his voice; he leant forward and spoke earnestly. Involuntarily, Alec also lowered his voice when he replied.

"Alec," he said, "that man frequently was very nearly in the line of play. Would it be possible for you—without letting Don Jose at the other side of the course notice it, and without too obviously showing this watch-dog that you were aiming at him—to hit him hard with that golf-ball?"

"*Tony!* Play deliberately at him, you mean?"

"Quite deliberately," said Tony Valais quietly, "quite deliberately . . . and with intent to cause grievous bodily harm."

Alec Graeme sat back in his chair. He very much disliked the prospect: it appeared to him to resemble too much an attack in cold blood. It was true enough that throughout the years both during and after the war Alec Graeme had been compelled to resort to violence when in many a tight corner, but he had always only done so when the situation had indeed been beyond all other aid. He had never deliberately pulled a trigger while seated in ambush, or after enticing his victim into a trap. And another aspect of the affair occurred to him. To play a shot with a slice or a hook on purpose was a matter of small difficulty to a golfer of his calibre, even when out of practice, but to aim at a man from a range of something between six and ten yards, with the intention of striking him, was a very different matter, the result of which, even had he been in full practice and in command of all his skill at the game, was highly problematical.

He looked up at his friend.

"Tony," he said, "I think I see what you are getting at. You want first of all to entice our guardian as far away as possible from that other watch-dog who caddies for Jose Alvares. And then you want me to lay out our own particular chap by hitting him with the golf-ball in the early stages of a full shot. You're asking a hell of a lot, you know. I don't believe that even a few years ago, when I was winning a few pots up in Scotland, I could have guaranteed to do it. Now I certainly could not."

Valais leant back and for a moment did not speak: when he did, his voice was suave and perfectly even.

" Alec," he said, " some surprising things happen in golf, don't they? I mean, even the best players make the most astonishing shots? "

" That," said Alec, " is perfectly true."

" Very well then. Supposing a man were standing in a position where the danger was greater than it should be, and supposing you did aim at him quite deliberately without the knowledge of our host, and supposing you did miss him, although giving him, perhaps, the fright of his life, it could never be held against you that you had played deliberately at him, could it? "

" No," said Alec, not without a certain hesitation, " no, I suppose you are right."

" I mean to say, it's the sort of thing that could easily be explained away to anyone who knew about the game? "

" Yes."

" Well, our Brazilian host knows about the game—at least a certain amount, doesn't he? "

" He does," said Alec, " his remark about my taking the honour because I was conceding the odds shows that, even if his skill on the links does not."

" So that," continued the Frenchman, " should you make an unfortunate error and fail to hit him in some disabling place, you immediately apologize and tell Don Jose you were afraid such a thing might happen owing to the dangerous place in which our friend was standing . . . but that you could not make him understand you wished him to move."

"That would be perfectly possible," said Alec quietly.

"You realize what I am implying, don't you?" added Tony, after a moment's pause. "You must not fail . . . because it will be our last chance."

"Tony," said Alec quickly, "what is the use of it all? I'm afraid I'm being a frightful pessimist, but I don't understand what possible help it could be to us to lay this fellow out. There are hundreds of others, and even if we did get away to the woods . . . well, what about the Indians?"

"The Indians, my friend Alec," said Tony quietly, "would have to follow us into those woods. Now this they could do, as you rightly point out, making greater progress through the undergrowth than ever we could achieve, but I don't propose that we should go through the undergrowth."

"Quit talking in riddles . . ."

"And come to the midday meal? Right! There is a river not eighty yards down the slope and through the trees on the right-hand side of that golf-course."

In a flash the whole plan unfolded itself to Alec Graeme, but his anxious Scottish mind once again thought of a snag.

"You mean," he said, "that granted a canoe or boat of some sort, we could make such progress down that river that we would be far in advance of any possible Indian pursuit? It seems to me, Tony, that your plan is miraculous, excellent in every respect but two. Forgive me, old fellow, but *granted* a canoe, and *granted* that there is only one canoe and not another in which Don Jose's satellites could follow us."

Tony Valais sat back in his chair and laughed outright.

"Alec," he said, "you are the perfect complement to me. We should do great things together if we were ever really closely associated in our work. Not that we have done so badly in this our first attempt." He smiled. "Well enough in any case to receive close attention from the fountain-head. With unerring instinct you've hit upon the two obvious difficulties to my plan of escape. Please understand that I am not being rude when I say 'obvious.' . . . I mean the two apparently insurmountable troubles. I agree . . . I'll go so far as to admit that without the canoe and without the knowledge that we will not be pursued, at any rate too rapidly, we cannot do very much with this plan of mine. But I think that the presence of this river opens up a possibility which should be investigated; probed to the full, in fact. I propose to have another conversation with our friend, the warder, this evening when he brings us our supper, and to show him that we are by no means penniless. It seems to me that it would be an excellent idea to let him benefit from Don Jose's gift, providing, of course, that he can steer a canoe—but then all these fellows can—or he may even have a friend, a true Indian, to pilot us to safety. It seems to me that he must know whether this river is navigable . . . if it is, where a canoe and a canoeist, or whatever the word is, is available, and also how many canoes are about the place, where they are, and how they can be made unseaworthy. Are you beginning to get me?"

"I am getting you all right," said Alec, "but I see two more difficulties."

He laughed. He had gone beyond apologizing for his objections.

"In the first place, the mention of a bribe to this warder of ours may have the effect of making him go straight to Don Jose and informing him of our activities. These activities would not, I feel, quite meet with our host's approval, and reprisals might be the only result. Secondly, we will have to take it on faith from this gentleman that our plans will not be betrayed the moment we've handed over the money."

"The first of your objections," said Tony Valais smoothly, "is perfectly reasonable, and is a risk that is unavoidable. I can't answer it, except that if we are to get away we must take some risk somewhere. On the other hand, I think that a suitably large bribe and the proof that we have the wherewithal will undoubtedly protect us from this dangerous possibility. The second of your objections is equally true and equally unanswerable, but I propose to circumvent it as far as possible by offering our friend my share of Don Jose's generous gift, showing him the money and promising him that your share, which for safety's sake I shall pretend we have not got until we reach our destination, shall be handed over on our safe arrival."

"Where is our destination?" asked Alec.

"God knows," said Tony, "but somewhere, I trust, sufficiently near Rio: first, for us to confirm that our services are no longer required by the Government of Brazil, or at least by that member of the Government who commissioned us; and secondly, sufficiently near to a nice, comfortable boat bound for Europe at an average of at least fifteen knots per hour."

For some moments there was a pause. Both friends were deep in thought, considering the possibilities which with every second were becoming less vague in their minds. Then Alec looked at his friend and laughed: for a little while he could scarcely speak. Valais smiled back at him and, knowing his man, waited patiently for the words he knew would come. At last Alec spoke.

"Your suggestion, Tony, is impossible," he said. "How can we take the other half, my half, of the bribe away from this place and not keep to our promise with Don Jose?"

"I'd thought of that," said Tony quietly. "There are two alternatives. In the first place, we could deliberately state that one or other of us will have to keep to the bargain to its full extent, which means that one or other of us will for ever be out of action with Don Jose as far as our discoveries over the last four years are concerned. This in itself seems to me better than that both of us should be out of action, and we can decide before we start who is likely to be the most useful in combating his schemes and make it very clear that that person's money is used for the initial stages of the bribe. But what I would much prefer is for both of us to be free, and in order to achieve this it will be necessary that neither of us should take the other half of the money away *from this place*. In these circumstances it will be necessary for whoever it is who pilots our canoe to carry the money away unknowingly himself."

Alec Graeme hesitated for one moment only before replying.

"You know," he said, "this is only a play on the words."

"I entirely admit that," said Tony Valais, and his voice was low and very serious, "but you must remember that we are dealing with a man whom we well know to be an arch-fiend. He is entirely regardless of everything except the accumulation of wealth and power for himself. He acknowledges no lord. He is, as far as he is concerned, his own Almighty. In these circumstances he can do no wrong in his own eyes, and he is not slow to take advantage of any such loophole as that of which we ourselves are now proposing to take advantage. He is a man who does not hesitate to kill when killing suits him . . . to inflict worse than death when that may serve his purpose. We know that, Alec, you and I, and we are the only two people, perhaps, to know to what extent he has carried on this tyranny. I think it is our plain duty to stop it, and I think it is our plain duty to take advantage of any loophole which may be offered to us. Do you agree?"

"I suppose I do," said Alec hesitantly.

Tony Valais sat back in his chair and shook his head at his friend.

"My God!" he said, "you Englishmen . . . I beg your pardon, Scotchmen, both of you, you stagger me. You stick to your own interpretation of honesty and you expect everyone else to do the same . . . no wonder you get let down, and what a wonder it is that you have such a vast and marvellous empire."

He paused, then suddenly leaning forward, he took another cigarette from the table and lit it before he spoke.

"Listen, Alec. You are, in a sense, a police officer . . . in a very vague sense, I admit, but still, an officer of an authority designed to retain law and order. Supposing that you were going after a man, a murderer whom it was your bounden duty to apprehend. Supposing that it was quite obvious he was going to escape for good from this crime that he had committed against society unless you pulled the trigger of your gun and shot him down. Would you hesitate to do so?"

"No," said Alec instantly. "I would not."

"You'd pull that trigger?"

"I would pull that trigger."

"That is all," said Tony Valais quietly, but very earnestly, "that is all that I am asking you to do now."

He paused: he looked at his friend through those half-closed eyes, so that Alec Graeme could not guess at what he was thinking, and then suddenly he spoke again:

"I will give you another example, a true one this time. During the war, when I was behind the German lines, I had some information which it was necessary for me to convey to my Government as soon as possible. In obtaining this information I unfortunately betrayed my presence. It was necessary for me to get out of the place at all costs, as I was the only man who knew something which was of great importance. I shot my way out . . . I murdered men . . ."

"No," said Alec, breaking in quietly, "you didn't . . . that was war . . . a very different thing."

"I beg your pardon," said Valais, "but that was not war. At least, not in the way in which it is normally and rightfully considered . . . certainly by the English and Scotch—for I shot down civilians as well as soldiers, Alec, civilians who had done me no harm, civilians who were taking no part in the fighting. Was I right or was I wrong?"

It went against the grain, but Alec had to acknowledge the truth.

"You were perfectly right," he said.

Valais shrugged his shoulders, and in that simple action expressed far more than any words of his could ever have conveyed.

"It is agreed, then," he said after a pause, "that we make this attempt, Alec? That I do my best to arrange what I can with our warder?"

"And that I," said Alec quietly, "do my best to kill a man with a golf-ball at six yards' range?"

Valais rose to his feet and in silence the two men shook hands.

There came a knock on the door, the sound of a key in the lock.

" Our saviour, I hope," said Valais quietly.

When the warder entered the room Alec Graeme was lying on his bed glancing at an illustrated magazine, one of many which had been supplied to the two captives since the change in their host's attitude towards them, and Tony Valais was seated at the table writing a note.

SIX

Tony Valais engaged the warder in conversation almost at once, but in rather a peculiar way, for the first thing he did was to remove from his pocket an envelope, which out of the corner of his eye Alec Graeme quickly recognized, and to display rather ostentatiously the corners of the notes contained therein. Casting a covert glance at the little olive-skinned warder, Alec saw an avaricious glint leap suddenly to his eyes as they sighted the bait. Then Tony Valais started to speak. He spoke very low, and from his bed Alec could catch only a word or two, but what was said must have been extremely direct for the Brazilian listened in silence, with an occasional nod or shake of his head. Finally, with an abrupt movement, Valais returned to his pocket the envelope, which throughout the conversation he had been fingering significantly, and spoke in an even lower tone. The other nodded curtly, turned on his heel and left the room, closing the door noiselessly behind him.

Alec Graeme could scarcely wait until it was shut before leaping from the bed in order to hear the outcome of the conversation. Quickly he moved to the table and sat down in a chair beside it. He did not look at the food: instead his eyes were fixed eagerly upon his friend, as anxiously he waited for him to speak. But again Valais's eyes were half-closed and nothing could be guessed from his expression. Whether he were pleased or dejected by the result of the conversation it would have been quite impossible for anyone to discover. It was obvious that he was deep in thought, and although chafing with impatience Alec knew better than to disturb him. Suddenly Valais looked up, and although his face was solemn enough his eyes were smiling.

"I think," he said, "that we've started well. Our friend has made no bones about it. He saw the colour of the notes and realized their denomination. He knows he's dealing in a big thing. But there's a snag. When I mentioned the river he shook his head vigorously and said a few words, sufficient to make me realize that we are up against a pretty stiff proposition there. Apparently it is not used normally by . . . what was the word we used? . . . canoeists . . . at any rate not for pleasure trips. It's infested with alligators and with rocks—a mistake in navigation, which in a more healthy river might lead only to a ducking, would apparently in this one be fatal."

"Where does the river lead?" asked Graeme.

"I don't know," said Valais. "We didn't get as far as that, but in our next conversation we will no doubt get a little farther."

"What did you say to him exactly?" asked Alec Graeme with interest.

"I treated him," said Valais, "in the manner to which I thought he would best react. I just told him the plain facts . . . that we had a good deal of money, a lot of money, in fact . . . that this money was his if we could get away, but that we were not going to wander into the jungle just to be recaptured by Don Jose's Indians. I hinted that a more rapid mode of transport than wandering was necessary, and I suggested the river. That was when he shook his head. I gathered, however, that although fraught with danger and difficulty that method of escape is not absolutely impossible. It has been navigated, and I rather gathered also that there is somebody in this company who can do it."

"Can do it for certain?" asked Graeme.

Valais smiled.

"Who knows?" he said. "Who can tell with any dangerous enterprise the ultimate outcome, but on the other hand, we've got to take a risk if we are to get away, Alec."

"Yes. I realize that."

"Very well, then. He's coming back to talk to me to-night."

"To-night!"

Valais smiled.

"It was my suggestion, I'm afraid, which must lead to your curbing your impatience just a little longer. You see, if in bringing us our food he were to remain too long in conversation it might lead to suspicion . . . it might lead to awkward questions from his fellows.

We want to avoid that as far as possible. That is why he is going to sneak away to-night, return to us and have a talk with me. I shall know a lot more when this chat has taken place."

They consumed their meal, an excellent one, in silence: each was occupied fully with his thoughts. At the end, however, Valais looked up at his friend and there was a sly smile on his face.

"Alec," he said, "it may be that you are not quite so keen to get away as I am. It may be that you would prefer to be returned to your own country in safety, plus your three thousand pounds."

An exclamation of disgust came from Alec Graeme.

"Good God!" he said, "if you hadn't tapped out that word 'yes' to me, do you think I'd ever have accepted that filthy bribe?"

"So I may take it," said Valais, an affectionate smile playing about his lips, "that you are at one with me in desiring to make your escape without taking the money *from this place*?"

"That is exactly how you may take it," replied Alec firmly.

"In spite of the fact," said Valais, and this time the smile had gone and he was speaking very earnestly, very seriously in that impressive, rather slow manner of his which leant so much weight to his words, "in spite of the fact that I shouldn't think it is more than an even money bet that we don't succeed in navigating that river? Think of it for a moment, Alec. Safety . . . and a large lump of easily won money—but with a nasty taste in our mouths, I'm afraid, at any rate for a certain number of years. On the other hand, a very slender chance of really getting away *without* that comparative wealth and with the definite possibility, if not probability, of offering ourselves as a succulent meal to the creatures of that river."

Alec Graeme looked at his friend before answering and a slow smile came to his good-natured face.

"Tony," he said, "I've taken a great many risks that you know of in the course of the last four years: do you think I'll shirk the last one, which will give me back my self-respect?"

"I should say," said Tony Valais, "that it is unlikely."

"Thank you," said Alec. "Carry on with your plans, and good luck to them."

They retired to their beds early that night, having watched the warder removing the dishes which had contained their supper, during which he made no slightest sign relative to his appointment with Tony Valais later that evening. Neither of them could sleep: both were far too excited at the possible outcome of their plans for any soothing slumber to be possible. But when at last the Indian did return, although Alec Graeme had been awake the whole time awaiting him, he was not aware of another presence in the room until he heard Tony Valais deep in conversation with someone close at hand in the darkness. The fact was a little disquieting, for it made Alec realize that they had indeed burnt their boats by displaying their wealth. Obviously, to this man of the wilds, it was by no means a difficult matter to enter that room without their knowledge, even although they were awake. He had the gift of uncanny, silent movement which seemed to be the birthright of the Indian race, inherited from their grandparents in the distant past. What more likely, therefore, if the negotiations on which they were at the present moment engaged failed to come to fruition, than that he might creep into their room one night and apply his knife with deadly effect to both of them, thereupon removing their wealth, a fraction of which he had been permitted to see during his conversation with Valais?

These thoughts occupied Alec's mind unhappily for a little while, during which Tony conversed in low tones with the Indian, so low, indeed, that Alec could hear nothing of the actual words spoken. He lay there in the darkness wondering what his fate would be, having a curious impersonal sensation that his future was being mapped out for him and that he himself had no say in the matter. It was, in a way, rather fun, this utter lack of any responsibility. He had given his consent: he would do what his friend, whom he trusted, told him to do. But he had to wait for the occasion . . . and there is nothing so disquieting as the lull before a storm. His thoughts then turned to that shot which he was to play on the golf-course on the following evening, that shot upon the accuracy of which hung the entire success of the enterprise. Alec smiled to himself in the darkness, a grim smile. It had never occurred to him when in his youth he had been learning this game of golf, acquiring that skill which had earned for him no small measure of fame in his own country, that he would ever have to put it to such a strange use. There was something rather unpleasing about it all. Frequently, as he had implied in his conversation with Tony Valais, Alec Graeme had been compelled to kill: on other occasions to maim, or, at least, temporarily to disable. To violence, in fact, he was no stranger. But it had always been in hot blood that violence: he had never lain in ambush waiting for the time to use his bullet, and such action was repugnant to him. He would have to square up to his ball, take his stance and deliberately aim to hurt, possibly, and even better from the point of view of their enterprise . . . to kill. There was no denying the fact that a golf-ball, hit hard from six yards' range or thereabouts, would kill if it struck a man on the temple. Such things had happened in golf before, but always unintentionally. Here he was about to play a shot deliberately intended to disable, and Alec Graeme wondered how he would feel in that moment. He had felt nervous before, very often on the first tee in a championship match, very often on the last green when a difficult putt had to be holed in order to win a trophy, but he realized that the nerves from which he had suffered on such occasions would be as nothing compared with the state of his mind when the crucial moment came on the following evening. The thought was more than disquieting: it was horrible, and Alec suddenly reminded himself that these reflections were of no use to him at all at the moment, and that the sooner he rid himself of them the better. It is easy to work up to a state of mind bordering upon hysterical panic: it is far better to cast from one's thoughts any conjectures on what is to come until the moment itself arrives. That was an axiom which Alec Graeme remembered having had drummed into him by his uncle for the purpose of steadying his nerves before competitive play: that was an axiom which stood just as well for this, the greatest golf-match he would ever play in all his life.

At last the conversation between the other two came to an end, but Alec did not appreciate that they were alone and that the warder had gone until Tony Valais struck a match, perhaps to assure himself also upon that point. The door was closed: the room, save for themselves, was empty. Valais blew out the match, slipped out of bed and came over to that of his friend.

"All set?" Alec asked eagerly. "He's got someone? He's got a canoe?"

"Yes," said Tony Valais, very quietly. "All set, old man. It's up to you now, but we'll talk about it in the morning."

He returned to his bed, but it was not until some hours later that sleep at length overcame the turmoil of thoughts which bustled about the brain of Alec Graeme.

SEVEN

THE two friends spent most of the following day rather silently. True, Tony Valais handed over the envelope, the contents of which Alec Graeme well knew, to the warder when he brought their breakfasts, but no words passed between them, only a knowing smile. They spoke little except to arrange their plans, but this was soon done, and as the day wore on Alec Graeme found himself becoming more and more nervous, suffering from all those physical signs which indicated a state of anxiety similar to that which he remembered experiencing before an important championship match on some golf-course in Scotland. He was unable, which made it worse, to practise the shot which he proposed to play, for the clubs had not been left with the two men, perhaps because the Brazilian guard was not quite sure of them, and feared lest they might make some use of these to effect their escape. Little did he know, thought Alec Graeme, that in spite of his precaution one of them actually was to be put to just such a purpose.

The day wore on slowly. The hours seemed to drag by, and much as he strove to hide his feelings from his friend, Graeme felt that he must be revealing them time and again by nervous movements or little manifestations of irritability from which he could not refrain. But in Tony Valais he noticed no sign of any excitement. The Frenchman seemed to be entirely impervious to any effects of the strain through which he also must be passing. But the zero hour will come, no matter how undesired or how greatly longed for, and as the sun moved from directly overhead and the power of its rays lessened, the door of the room in which they were imprisoned was opened, and the same man, again armed to the teeth, appeared once more with that set of clubs in the bag. These he handed to Valais, presuming, as he had done on the previous evening, that the Frenchman would caddie for his friend, and once again he tapped his revolver significantly, but he said no word. Tony Valais laughed, and in the state of suppressed excitement in which he found himself, Alec Graeme frowned at his friend, fearful of anything which might mar their plans, but the Frenchman continued to smile as he followed their guard from the room. Alec Graeme brought up the rear.

As they came out into the sunlight Alec glanced around him thoughtfully, wondering whether this was indeed the last time he would ever see the scene. He stared at the high white walls which hid so securely the place of their captivity, and as they hastened on their way, at the tangled mass of trees through which the path led them to the one-hole golf-course, at the course itself, so strangely surrounded by jungle trees and those sinister-looking, cold grey rocks. Arrived at the first tee, Don Jose welcomed them.

" I trust, Captain Graeme," he said, and although his manner was pleasant there was very little real humour in the smile with which he greeted them, " I trust, Captain Graeme, that we shall have as close a match as yesterday, but that the result will be slightly different."

Alec Graeme laughed, but the laugh, even in his own ears, sounded unreal.

" Damn it," he said to himself, " this is nonsense. I must pull myself together or I'll give the whole show away."

And aloud:

" I'll do my best to prevent that, Alvares."

" Your honour," said the Brazilian.

Graeme teed up for his ball, and as he did so, suddenly a new significance to that little white sphere came to his mind. Ordinarily he had always considered a golf-ball as a somewhat friendly thing, something which was on his side in the enjoyment of a game; but now he recognized in this apparently unchanged ball a possible messenger of death, a messenger to be dispatched by his own hand. The ball fell from the tee and Alec Graeme swore under his breath. Once this had happened to him before when, with shaky fingers, he had attempted to tee his ball preparatory to driving off in the Medal at St. Andrews, under the eyes of many experienced critics watching his efforts through the immense windows of the Big Room. But on this occasion, only the second on which he had been guilty of such a blunder, there had been no great crowd watching him: he had done so under the eyes of only four men.

Alec Graeme replaced the ball on the tee and stood up. A sudden expression had come to his mouth, an expression which was not lost on the watching Tony Valais. The Frenchman smiled to himself, a smile quite imperceptible to those around. He had been waiting for this signal, this indication that his friend now had himself under control for the business in hand.

Alec Graeme took a practise swing, and Tony Valais, who knew nothing of the game, yet could not but marvel at the grace with which he handled his club. Alec stood to the ball and hit it far down the middle of the fairway.

"Good shot," said Alvares, in a slightly grudging tone.

He also teed up: he also hit his ball, not so far nor so straight, but still to no harm.

As they walked down the fairway, as they stood for a few moments watching Alvares play his second shot, Tony Valais, out of the corner of his mouth, hissed a few words to his friend.

"It will be necessary," he said, "for the success of our plan, that the Brazilian should drive first."

"I know," said Alec. "Watch me lose this hole."

But it was not quite so easy as all that, for the Brazilian had missed his second and was forced to play his third before Alec Graeme took up his stance again.

This shot, however, was as good as any of which Alvares was capable, and the ball lay on the edge of the green. With a secret smile to his friend, Alec lifted his head in an imperious manner and struck the ball firmly on the top. It rolled but a few yards towards the green.

"Hullo!" said the Brazilian, a smile on his face. "A most unusual mistake for you to make!"

Alec Graeme laughed.

"All sorts of unexpected things will happen if you are out of practice," he said: but even as he spoke he could not refrain from casting a quick glance towards the Frenchman, and he noted that Valais mouthed the word "Alibi!"

He smiled to himself. He hit his next on to the green and then found himself faced with the not very difficult task on that rough surface of taking three putts in order to get down in six. This Alec succeeded in doing, so that Alvares with his stroke won the hole and took the honour at the next tee. Alvares sliced his ball, with the result that he was on the side of the fairway nearest to the river. Tony's disappointment was almost visible in his face, but now that the game had started, now that the battle was on, Graeme had become master of himself once more. He hit the ball well down the middle, realizing that for that hole, at any rate, he could do nothing to further their plans. They played out the hole, but once again Alec failed on the green in order that Alvares should retain the honour. The Brazilian seemed to be very pleased with himself. The skilful inefficiency on the part of the Scotsman had obviously passed as genuine, for Alvares made no comment, but walking with perhaps a slightly more determined air to the next tee, he teed up his ball and hit it. The opportunity had come, for he sliced his ball again and it lay far out, nearly off the fairway, in the trees on the opposite side to that on which lay the river. Alec Graeme took a practise swing, and as he did so he turned and spoke to the Brazilian.

"Two down," he said, "I must get going."

Once again he swung the club before taking up his stance to the ball. Tony Valais watched him with approval. For although he noted his friend's swing with great care in order to detect some slight difference from the normal, he could see nothing. This, however, was due to his ignorance of the game, for to a golfer of the same calibre as Alec Graeme it would have been apparent that when he gripped the club his right hand was turned over away from him, and when he took up his stance his right foot was slightly behind his left. The result was inevitable: as the crack of the impact of the ball on the club head resounded in the air and the ball sped away, it travelled this time by no means straight. Instead it took a vicious curl to the left and finished just within the trees on the left-hand side of the fairway . . . a glorious hook, a hook which was intentional in every detail.

"Bad luck!" said the Brazilian. "I'm afraid you're in trouble this time. "Well"—he nodded towards the green—"I'll see you later."

Alec Graeme smiled. Would he ever see that olive-skinned face again? he wondered. He nerved himself to the ordeal in front of him, for he knew that the success of the first skirmish in the fight was with them, and that it was up to him to conquer equally in the second and by far the most difficult part. Don Alvares and his armed caddie walked off towards the right of the fairway, where the ball could be seen lying, probably by no means badly. Valais followed Alec Graeme to the left-hand side of the fairway, from which even now the river could be heard angrily lashing against the rocks which restricted its progress. Graeme led the way to that spot in the woods where his ball had disappeared. Tony Valais was close behind, and walking beside him, but two or three paces distant, was the silent guard, a supercilious expression on his face, an expression which seemed to convey: "What is this stupid game?" but always his right hand carefully gripped the butt of his revolver.

Now that the moment had come, Alec Graeme felt strangely cool, even under the heat of the retiring Brazilian sun. He had made up his mind that he was not going to fail. No feeling of pity came to him for this man who was to be the unknowing object of his next shot: all that he prayed for was that the man himself would take up some position which would make it possible. They found the ball lying a yard within the trees. Out of the corner of his eye Alec caught a glimpse of a steep bank leading down to the riverside, and as he did so his heart gave a leap within him, for drawn right up to the side he saw the vague outlines, discernible here and there through the undergrowth, of a long and slender canoe. No sign could be seen of the man who was to pilot them, but no doubt he was hiding somewhere in the vicinity, awaiting their appearance before showing himself. But suddenly a horrible thought came to Alec, that the man might not be there, that he might have become afraid at the last moment and broken his promise. At once, however, he thrust this idea from him: it was unsettling, something which he must forget in order to be able to carry out his attempt with success.

He looked at the ball carefully. Valais was standing directly behind him on the side of the river bank, ready, apparently, for immediate flight. The Brazilian guard stood on the fairway just outside the trees, and at that moment he took a packet of cigarettes from his pocket and placed one between his lips. He fumbled for a light. A quick glance across at the other fairway showed Alec that Alvares had played his second shot and was now walking up towards the hole, deep in conversation with his caddie.

It was now or never, and Alec suddenly realized that the fates so far were with him. He took an iron club from the bag, rather a straight-faced iron, for the ball was lying cleanly on the fern-like covering of the soil. He noted that it would have to be hit clean in order to take the loft of the club and strike the Brazilian fair. He noted that the ground was soft, that he must not make the mistake of getting under the ball. All these things came to his mind in a flash, for he had already taken up his stance. If only the guard continued to find a little difficulty in getting that match, and his aim did not fail him, all would be well.

Alec Graeme gritted his teeth and swung at the ball.

Almost before he struck it Alec realized that he had failed. He had forgotten one vital axiom in all shots at golf where nerves play a part: he had forgotten that the only reason why on that first tee at St. Andrews—a memory of which had come to him when first he had struck off that evening—he had struck the ball properly was that he had swung so slowly, so unbelievably slowly to him that he seemed never to be coming to the ball. In reality it had been a swing of normal pace, for the action of nerves is to tauten the muscles and make the swing work at an incredible speed, which is fatal to a good shot. In the tensity of the moment Alec had forgotten all this, and he had almost swung himself off his feet, with the inevitable result that he looked up long before the club head had reached the ball, perhaps owing to his anxiety to see the result of the shot.

Yet so kind was Providence that the shot could not actually have been more successful for the purpose in hand. It was struck low on the sole of the club, with the result that it left the ground like a bullet, very low, and struck the Brazilian guard full upon the knee. The crack resounded like a pistol-shot, but was nothing in comparison with the noise made by the startled man himself. The howl must have been heard for miles around, or so it seemed to Alec Graeme, as the man went down, writhing in pain, his hands clasped to his knee, his olive complexion startled into almost a rosy hue.

And then to Alec at any rate, a surprising thing happened, for Tony Valais also shouted, threw his head back and gave a long call of joyful triumph. But only for a second. Almost immediately his imperative words reached Alec Graeme's somewhat bemused brain.

" Quick! " he said, " down to the boat."

And even as the sense of the words dawned on Alec's mind, so did a sudden new idea. Before obeying his instructions he leapt forward, picked up the revolver which, in falling, the guard had dropped upon the ground, and looking across the fairway towards the two figures standing there stationary in surprise, he waved the gun jubilantly at them. Then he turned and rushed to the riverside.

A few moments later into the swirl of the river went the canoe, Tony Valais in the bows, Alec Graeme seated in the middle with revolver held firmly in his hand, alert for immediate attack, the warder who had been detailed to look after them for the last few days seated in the rear, with strained face and eyes shining with excitement, his paddle unceasingly at work.

Alec looked behind him. At almost the identical spot whence they had made their dramatic dash for safety, a girl was standing leaning against a tree. Somehow her natural grace and the beauty of her features seemed to him, in the unexpectedness of the vision, something unreal, something amazing. Her presence scattered his moment of fear, his feeling of triumph, his sensation of nerves.

She raised a slender hand and waved a farewell, and Alec could have sworn that she was laughing.

PART TWO

ONE

" Alec," said my uncle, with a touch of asperity in his voice, " please provide the decanter with a fair wind."

I looked up from my thoughts and smiled across the table, at the same time complying with the request and pushing the decanter towards him.

We were seated after dinner at the dining-table, the coffee already completed, just the two of us, but there are certain things upon which, although he is one of the greatest-hearted and most tolerant of men, my uncle insists. One of these is the correct, undeviating ritual which for years has accompanied the solemn progress of a decanter filled with port around the dining-table after dinner. It was not as though my uncle's glass had been empty and he was ready for the refresher, using the word in the lawyer's sense, of his second glass: it was merely that the decanter had no right, according to him and his generation, to pause for longer than was necessary, once it had started on its clockwise journey around the table, until it had reached the sanctuary of the wine-slide.

My hand moved to my hip-pocket and my fingers touched a cigarette-case there before, with a start, I furtively replaced it on the table and lightly touched the stem of my glass. I had very nearly committed another error, but an error this time for which my uncle would have accepted no excuse. The mere sight of a cigarette before everyone around the table had had all that they required of the vintage wine reacted upon him like a red rag, I believe, acts upon a bull, and I began to wonder whether I would not, after my long absence from home, have to be very careful in the first few days not to commit one of the very few unforgiveable sins of that house.

The decanter was placed in the wine-slide and my uncle and guardian smiled across the table to me.

" No need to say how glad I am to see you back."

I smiled at him.

" No need to say how glad I am to *be* back," I said quietly.

There was nothing sentimental about it: the words were spoken quite naturally, and they meant to imply their exact literal meaning. It was the first time, during the three hours in which I had been at home, that my uncle had mentioned in words any satisfaction at my return. I smiled to myself, for I remembered that during part of the lonely car journey on my way up to the north of Scotland I had told myself that it would take my uncle just about three hours to articulate his feelings on my return, and I was pleased with myself for such an accurate prognostication. But just as though he had not, even for that one moment, torn the veil from his usual reticence, my uncle continued his conversation in no different tone of voice.

"I have made many improvements in the garden," he said, "that I hope you will like. We must look at them . . . to-morrow, perhaps."

Dutifully I replied:

"Where, in particular?"

"A new rock-garden," said my uncle quietly, with an obvious glow of pride in his voice and noticeable in the expression of his eyes.

He described to me just where he had placed this garden and just how he had built it, but I am afraid that my mind wandered a little during this narration. I could not help thinking how little he had changed in the four years which had elapsed since last I had seen him. His hair had thinned not in the least, but instead of being grey it was now entirely white. It suited him. There were no new lines that I could discover in the weather-beaten face: the eyes were as clear as ever, the mouth as determined. His figure was that of a young and not an old man, and I caught myself wondering whether if ever I lived to reach his age I would be half so fit. I doubted it, and yet it was a thing which I felt was much to be envied.

"We will look at all that to-morrow afternoon, if you are not busy," concluded my uncle. "I think you will like it. But in the morning, no doubt, you will want to play golf."

I laughed.

"I haven't played golf," I said, "more than once or twice in the whole time that I've been away."

My uncle raised his eyebrows.

"I haven't had a chance," I was quick to explain.

"Too busy?"

"Yes. Too busy."

"Not even on week-ends?" suggested my uncle gently.

I laughed again.

"There are no week-ends where I was. Sunday is just like a Monday or a Saturday or any other day of the week."

"But you must have some rest sometimes!"

I smiled again.

"Of course," I said, "in the evening, and occasionally a few days away from camp doing something quite different. That's a rest, you know, in itself."

"Yes," said my uncle thoughtfully, "I suppose it is. But who are you going to play with to-morrow?"

I took my cue quickly.

"Why . . . *you*, I hope."

He smiled.

"I haven't played golf for two years," he said. "It isn't worth while. Thank God, I discovered when to stop."

I looked at him in surprise. When I had last left England my uncle had still been very near to scratch and was still as keen on the game as ever he had been in his illustrious days. Evidently, from his recent conversation, his keenness had not diminished, and I could not bring myself to believe that he was one of those who would willingly deny themselves pleasure merely because they were unable to perform the prodigies which, in their younger days, they had been accustomed to achieve on the links. But there was something about my uncle's expression which forbade my making further inquiries at that moment: it was an expression which I remembered seeing on his face when, as a child, I had been asking too many questions: it was an expression which I had always regarded as a danger signal. All in good time, when it suited him, he would tell me about that athlete's heart which I strongly suspected.

" There is a man up here . . . not a good golfer, I must admit, but a very nice fellow . . . a man whom you might be interested to meet. I have provisionally arranged that you should play with him in the morning. I have booked you a starting-time at ten."

" The old starting-time? " I broke in.

My uncle smiled.

" I think you will find," he said, " if you go down to the links that no matter how crowded they may be you will be able to leave the first tee within a few minutes of that hour on any morning."

Again I smiled, but comment was superfluous.

" Who is this man? " I asked.

" A man called Malcolm," said my uncle. " Very keen on the game indeed. Up here for a holiday. He has achieved some distinction, I believe, in . . . not exactly police work, but . . . er . . . well, something to do with the police. But he is here on a holiday and his ruling passion seems to be the game of golf. I like that man."

I looked at my uncle and laughed outright. Here was a naïveté that I well remembered. My uncle was always taken by any stranger who merely went so far as to profess a liking for the game of golf.

" I shall be pleased to play with him," I said. " But I think that he is a rather better-known man than you have made out."

" Is he? " My uncle seemed entirely uninterested. " Well, I think you will like him, anyway. Some more port? "

I nodded.

" Perhaps," I replied, " as it's my first night home."

My uncle laughed.

" I shall be surprised," he said, " if you don't consume a second glass on your second and third nights as well."

The decanter was started on its way, paused only long enough for me to fill my glass, and was returned to the other end of the table. My uncle carefully helped himself to his refresher and replaced the decanter in position.

" For this evening, no doubt," my uncle remarked, " you will want to go to bed early? "

" I *am* tired," I confessed. " It's a long drive, especially if you don't stop the night on the way."

" Some six hundred miles from London," he said; " far too much, even in the high-powered cars that you affect."

" But there's one thing I should like to do," I said, looking out of the windows, " and that is just to wander down to the garage for a moment and get a book which, like a fool, I left in the pocket of the car."

" Of course," said my uncle.

He turned round and looked out of the window. He saw, as I had just noticed, that although it was twilight the sun had only recently sunk below the horizon, and the night promised to be one of those clear, crisp nights which you only find in the north of Scotland.

" No need for a coat, I think," he added.

" None."

He looked across the table to my glass, saw that it was emptied: he raised his own to his lips and drained it. He rose to his feet.

" Shall we go? Perhaps we might make a slight detour and go down by the new rock-garden. We will see it in this light. Rather attractive, if I may say so. We can then walk down by the wood."

I followed him from the room and out to the front of the house, and as we walked I wondered for a moment whether it would not have been wise to have slipped some form of extra covering around our shoulders, for the nights in Scotland, beautiful though they may appear to be, are apt to freshen the air to an invigorating, but sometimes slightly uncomfortable, extent. I shuddered involuntarily, but my uncle did not notice it. After all, the journey to the garage would take us but a few minutes: I decided against turning back.

We passed through the new rock-garden and I had to admit that my uncle had made a magnificent job of it; but the rough stones seemingly thrown about by some giant as pebbles might be thrown about by a child, regardless of how they may fall, looked cold, sharp, almost grotesque and rather forbidding in the pale light of the stars.

Once again I shuddered involuntarily . . . but for quite another reason. A sudden memory of certain other rocks just as cold and evil-looking, but of vastly greater size, leapt to my mind and chilled me. I hastened my steps.

"We will see it better to-morrow," said my uncle, "but I wanted you to get your first glimpse in this light. I must say that it attracts me. I've come out here often by myself while you have been away, and . . . somehow felt more close to you."

I looked at him, startled. But he relapsed into silence, and I was quite glad to leave that rock-garden and to enter the dark menace of the woods: here, at least, I was at home, and the sudden scuttling of a rabbit from the undergrowth almost beneath my feet did not disturb me. We walked in silence through the fir trees until they began to thin, and the dark shape of the garage merged into outline.

The garage at my home is built directly upon the road, and the great folding doors open on to it, but at the back, by the way in which we had approached it, there is a small door which enables one to enter straight from the garden itself. My uncle took a key from his pocket, fitted this to the lock of the door, and turned it.

And even as he opened that door I had a sudden overwhelming desire that I had left my book where it was for that night, and had not suggested this expedition to the garage. Now this feeling was so strong and so unusual that after the first moment of what amounted almost to dread, I shook myself, not metaphorically, but actually, rather like a dog might shake itself of unpleasant damp after hunting through the dew. I simply failed utterly to understand this extraordinary aversion, and although I had actually felt no fear as yet, I knew that the sensation which I had just experienced was something very much akin to fear. Now fear is a thing which very few honest people can boast of never having experienced, but the fear of something entirely unknown, unexpected and unaccountable is something with which I have had no patience ever in my life. There have been moments when I have felt fear, but there has always been a very good reason for this, much too good a reason for my liking. Never before now, however, had I suffered from this strange sense of foreboding, from this curious premonition of approaching evil, from, in fact, such a violent distaste of going through that door which my uncle was now pulling open.

I think I can honestly say that the only reason why I did go through that door was because I could not understand either the feeling or myself, and it was sheer irritation with my nerves that made me take the necessary step forward. I remember wondering to myself, in that moment, whether what I had been told were indeed true; whether this holiday which I was taking was more necessary, perhaps, for my frayed nerves than I had imagined. As I stepped through that door, and as my hand moved to the electric light switch which I knew I would find on the wall just to my left, I happened to look across the garage towards the folding doors which led to the road, and as I looked at them—or, rather, looked into space, for I had not yet found the switch and all was still dark inside the garage—I suddenly saw something which made me remain motionless, something which, although I hate to admit it, frankly paralysed my power of movement and made me stand there like a fool, staring into the darkness with my fingers actually upon the switch of that light which might have restored my confidence, but utterly unable to actuate it.

And as I stood there I heard a sudden intake of breath from just behind me, and I realized that what I saw was no hallucination, but had been noted also by my uncle. It seems ridiculous to me to put down now the cause of this extraordinary paralysis, which appeared to be, after all, a perfectly natural if unexpected event; more so still, as it seemed to me extraordinary that I should have had that moment of premonition, that my senses should have foretold what was about to happen and given me due warning. Yet both these things occurred, and I am in duty bound, since this is to be a true tale of my experiences, to put everything in its proper order. I shall make no more excuses: I shall just state exactly all that happened.

What I had observed and what had struck me mute and incapable of movement was the sudden appearance of a gradually increasing vertical streak of pale grey light from the point where I knew the folding doors met on the other side. Thoughts flew through my mind with incredible rapidity at that moment. The first and obvious one, since the opening of that door was so gradual, careful to a degree which became almost sinister, was that some unauthorized person was seeking entry into the garage, someone who had no right to be there. The second was that it had been gross carelessness on my part to have left those doors unlocked when I had put the car away earlier that evening, an omission which I did not remember but of which, quite obviously, I must have been guilty. The third and last reflection—so rapidly does one's brain work on these occasions—was one of astonishment at myself for finding this situation so entirely paralysing that I could not perform the obvious action of anyone but an idiot . . . that I was unable to exert the very small pressure with my finger which would be necessary to flood that garage with light. But that I could not was only too true. I remained there as if struck to stone, staring at the ever-increasing streak of light, wondering who was responsible for the silent opening of that door.

Then two things happened, but neither was sufficient to jerk me from what I can only describe as my state of physical coma cum mental activity. The first was a sound behind me as if of someone falling, a thud, rather a sickening thud, such as a body might make if collapsing to the ground. The second was the sudden cessation of any care in the opening of that door opposite, for from just a streak of light from the outside world, it was suddenly opened wide enough to admit of the entry of a man. Now I remember saying to myself in that moment that of all the fools of which I had ever heard in this world, I must be the greatest. For something had happened behind me, something had happened to my uncle which *I knew* required immediate investigation. I believe that had the other thing not happened at that moment on the other side of the garage I could have turned and gone at once to my uncle's aid, but my eyes had become riveted on the outline of a very small but immensely broad man who was standing in the opening of the doorway, staring straight at me, or so I imagined.

This, I suppose, should not have been a surprise to me. After all, a door does not open of itself, somebody must be operating it, and what more probable than that a thief, possibly after my car, or what objects he might be able to remove from it, should have entered the garage. But it was the actions of this man which seemed to me to be so extraordinary, and which kept me still in that amazing condition of paralysis.

He hesitated not one single second, but moving straight towards me he advanced quickly across the floor. I had no shadow of doubt that that man had seen me; he must have, for he had exactly the same opportunities for seeing me as I had of observing him, since both of us were standing outlined against the open doorways. But if he were a thief, surely his first action would have been to turn and run. Instead he was advancing towards me, and by some curious effect of the dim light his shoulders, which I had at once observed to be broad, seemed to increase appreciably as he approached until the crack in the door behind was almost obliterated by his figure.

Once again he did something which prevented me from using those senses which I think had by now returned to me, for it is a curious and interesting fact that although fear of the unknown may remove from a man any power of movement, yet the actual presence of some tangible evil will frequently release him from this bondage, although the danger may be ever so much greater. But he was so purposeful and so aware of what he was doing that I waited for him, all thought of that ominous thud which I had heard behind me having vanished completely from my mind for the moment. And although, had he really come up to me, I would have switched on that light, he stopped about half-way across the garage and spoke. His voice was pitched very low, and was in some way rather fascinating to the ear.

" *They* know," he said very quietly. " I thought it was our secret. I can't imagine how they can possibly know . . . but they're going to get me. I want . . ."

He spoke in awkward, staccato sentences, as though he were in a hurry to explain himself, but something happened then which made his hurry very understandable. For there appeared abruptly, but silently, two figures on the other side of the garage. Even in that light I could discern their uniforms. They were members of the police force, and they moved across the intervening space straight to the little man. Whether or not he was aware of their presence I have no idea, but the sudden seizure of his arms by the two men, one on either side of him, stopped his speech abruptly in the middle of a sentence. There was a moment of struggle: the breadth of that little man's shoulders had not belied his strength, and he put up quite a good performance considering how hopelessly he was outnumbered, but in a second or two I heard a click, and I knew that handcuffs had been slipped into place.

" Well," said a voice, " what about some light? "

I felt in that moment exactly as if I had come to from the effects of some anæsthetic after an operation. I pressed on the switch, and even as I did so I felt the sweat on my hands slipping on the brass. But light instantly flooded the garage, and one of the policemen, obviously the superior officer of the two, turned to me with a smile.

" We've been after him for some time, sir," he said. " You wouldn't think that he would give us much trouble, would you? But he was out of luck to-night. I suppose it was your car that he was after? "

For a moment or two I did not reply. My eyes actually were resting on the mirror which my uncle's chauffeur had placed on the wall of the garage between two photographs cut from some illustrated paper, one of the Celtic Football Club team, the other of the equally famous Rangers team. But then, with an effort, I recovered some measure of my usual composure and I smiled.

"Very much out of luck, officer."

The conversation then might have lapsed rather awkwardly had it not been for the sudden attempt of the prisoner to escape, but the officers of the law had him too strongly in their clutches. Once again the senior of the two turned to me.

"I think we will get him off, sir. If you don't mind, I'll come and see you in the morning and just get a few particulars, but I don't think it will be necessary to worry you much further. Good night, sir."

"Good night," I answered mechanically, but my voice, even to my ears, sounded hard and unnatural. I wondered if this were noticeable, but apparently it was not, for without another word the men turned with their prisoner and marched him quickly from the garage. As they went I followed them, and as they passed through the door I closed it and locked it from the inside, and it was only then that I turned to see what had happened to my uncle.

I was surprised to see him standing in the doorway. I was not surprised to see him looking as pale as death, nor to notice that one hand rested on the side of the door affording him support.

I moved over to him quickly and took his arm.

"What happened?"

I don't think I have ever quite admired my uncle so much as I did in that moment. He was evidently ill, but he pulled himself together in a most remarkable way.

"Nothing," he said. "I can't understand what did happen. I fainted . . . why, God only knows. I'm ashamed of myself, Alec."

"When did you come to?" I asked, not without a certain anxiety in my voice.

"When those policemen were removing the thief."

I heaved a sigh of relief, for I had watched his eyes carefully, and my uncle does not tell a lie with ease. I knew that he had spoken the truth: I knew that he had seen nothing bar what he had told me.

"Let's get back to the house," I said quietly.

My uncle turned, shaking off the hand which I offered to help him. He moved out of the garage and stood aside for me to pass through the small door. As I did so, he suddenly remarked to me:

"What about that book?"

I smiled.

I returned to my car and removed the book from its pocket. When I had passed through the small door, my uncle locked it. We walked in silence back to the house; both of us, I think, were full of our own thoughts; neither of us wanted to discuss them. They were our own private worries and not for anyone else, even so trustworthy an individual as we each thought the other.

But I insisted that my uncle should retire to bed as soon as we had reached the house. I then lit a cigarette and stood for a moment in deep thought by the fireplace. I was thinking of what I had seen indirectly by means of that mirror stuck on the wall of the garage. Why, I asked myself, should a woman be stealthily watching all that had happened in the garage? How, I asked myself, could a girl, and so alarmingly attractive a girl, be interested in all that had happened?

I made up my mind. Once more I slipped out into the night. I wanted to know if she really had laughed that evening on the bank of the river.

TWO

As I walked rapidly in the darkness I was thinking hard, and the thoughts that scampered through my mind, chasing each other out of the way in their anxiety to come to the forefront, were many and rather disquieting.

When I landed on the shores of England I believed that for at any rate a little while I had left behind me all my worries, and I had laughed at the warning which only the previous day I had received in London. But it seemed to me now that that warning had been only too well founded. What on earth did this raid on the garage mean? What on earth was that girl—that girl whom I had frequently thought about ever since that evening in Brazil—doing in the garage, in Scotland even?

I was now passing through the new rock-garden: I looked once again at the somewhat grotesque outlines, just discernible, of the great stones which went to make it. Again I shuddered involuntarily, for again that lightning vision of those other rocks, and the grim circumstances in which I had seen them, flashed to my mind. I caught myself wondering whether, in the sunshine of the morrow, I would be able to gaze unmoved at the garden before me, whether the stones would look more friendly and that memory be banished in the morning light. I hastened by and along through the firs, in the same way as that in which my uncle and I had approached the garage a little while before; and as these began to thin, and once more I saw that dark shape disentangling itself from the general blackness around, I increased my pace, wondering, even as I did so, what lay in store for me, no plan of action in my head . . . undecided, yet determined.

As I crossed the final space to that back door—the door at which I had found myself, with my hand upon the electric light switch, afflicted by so strange a paralysis, upon the unexpected opening of those great doors on the other side—there was a sudden rift in the clouds and a welcome gleam of moonlight filtered through. I was thankful for this, as it enabled me to pick out the keyhole easily without feeling for it, place the key in the lock and turn it quickly. This, as I say, was all to my advantage, for thus I was able to make use of the element of surprise, surprise which is, after all, invaluable to the one effecting it.

I pushed open the door quickly, and my left hand flew to the switch and pressed it. Now I was to be very much more thankful for that rift in the clouds which had enabled the moon to become my ally for even that short moment. It was, in fact, a piece of extraordinarily good fortune, for it enabled me to catch a glimpse of something moving quickly just at my right hand and at about the level of my elbow. I could have seen this by no other means had the clouds still been concealing the face of the moon, and had that light not ranged itself so welcomely upon my side, for my action in pressing the electric light switch produced no result whatsoever: the garage remained in that darkness in which it had been when I arrived.

I shot out my right arm, and a little gasp came to me from the semi-darkness. I felt my arm act as a barrier, and my hand touched silk. My fingers closed around a fragile wrist. Instantly an attempt was made to break away from me, but I now knew what I was about. I had recovered from my surprise at the garage remaining dark: I could guess what had happened there, too. Quietly, but very firmly, with my left hand I seized the girl's other wrist and, holding her before me, I made her straighten herself. She had made a cunning attempt to dart past me under the level of my arm . . . but it had failed.

I looked at her as she stood before me, and just at that moment, when I realized that my first impression in the garage had indisputably been right and that here was one of the most lovely creatures I had ever seen, the moon decided to play tricks with me. It hid its face behind another cloud, a cloud of such impenetrable thickness that the light departed with complete suddenness, as though it had been turned off by a switch, and I was left standing in almost total darkness holding on to the wrists of this girl, and, quite honestly, not very clear as to what to do.

But then her voice came to me, and she spoke coolly and quietly.

" All right," she said. " One up to you. I won't try to get away . . . and so would you mind not hurting my wrists? "

The first thing that struck me about her was that voice. It was low but in no way husky, as are the voices of most women when pitched in that tone: it was clear, and although she spoke softly her speech was so distinct that her words came to me as though they had been spoken in my ear. It was a most attractive voice, according well with what I could remember of her face in that short glimpse I had been given of it before the moon had played truant. But as I stood there with these bewildering thoughts rushing through my mind, she spoke again.

" Would you mind," she said, " leaving go of my wrists? " She spoke very quietly, rather slowly, and there was an indefinable touch of authority in her voice. " I've told you that I won't try to escape again."

I was sorely tempted to do as she wished. I did, in fact, slightly release my grip upon her wrists, but I did not let her go.

" I see you don't trust easily," she said.

And then I spoke for the first time.

" I've learnt never to trust anyone," I answered quietly. " Would you mind going back into the garage? I want to lock the door, and then if you will show me where you put the globe, I will replace it and we can have a little light."

She laughed, but there was very little humour in that laugh: it was rather hard, and did not accord with what I remembered of her face. I could not blame her, however: I myself had been very hard in that moment, but she could not have known how difficult I had found it to act in that way. However, she did as I asked her. As I was still holding her wrists she drew me gently into the garage, and when once through the doorway I released my right hand, shut the door and locked it.

We were now, of course, in total darkness, for whatever small light had managed to filter through that cloud was now definitely shut out from us.

"The globe," she said quietly, without waiting to be asked again, "is on the driving seat of your car. I thought you'd find it there."

I released her now for the first time. I knew exactly where I had left the car, and thus was able to reach it without any difficulty or delay. But even as I started to search for the globe another thought struck me: there was a very much quicker way of bringing light into the garage than replacing the missing globe. Bending down to the dashboard, I pressed a switch, and the next instant light from the headlamps of my car streamed into the darkness. I turned to where the girl had been standing, but on the instant, even as I had pressed that switch, she slipped back out of the yellow beams into the shadows, so that again I caught but the barest glimpse of her. I turned in the direction in which she had disappeared.

"Don't you think," I said quietly, "that you are delaying matters? I'll put back the globe in a moment and the whole place will be lit, so there doesn't seem to be any particular need to jump out of the beam of these headlights. You see, it's unavoidable that I should look upon you."

I thought I heard her laugh, but I could not be sure because it was a very gentle sound.

"I don't propose," she said, "to make things any more easy for you. I have told you where the globe is. I got it out of the lamp by standing on the back seat of your car."

"Thank you," I said.

I found the globe where she had told me, and by the same means as she had removed it, I returned it in position. I then moved over to the switch and turned this on. The garage was flooded with light.

I did a thing then which I cannot quite explain. Studiously I avoided looking at her, although I knew exactly where she must be standing. First I moved back to my car and turned off the headlights, then I removed a rug which had lain beside me in the passenger-seat on my journey up to Scotland, and flung this over into the tonneau. It was not until I opened the door of the car that I turned towards her.

"You'd better sit down," I said. "This may be a rather long session, I'm afraid."

As I spoke I caught her eyes, and for a long moment we stared at each other. My two glimpses of her, both of which had told me to expect something very attractive, very beautiful even, had in no way lied to me. The first thing that struck me about her was that she was tall, nearly as tall as I am myself, but for all this height she was very finely made, she was, in fact, slender almost to the point of thinness. My eyes, a habit which they have when seeing a strange and attractive woman for the first time, wandered to her hands, and I noticed that they were in keeping with her figure, long and fine, with the tapering fingers of an artist and the rose-coloured, pointed nails that denote attention. And then at last my eyes came to rest on her face.

She was very dark, but with none of that sallow complexion so frequent with dark people: if anything, she was rather highly coloured. Her eyes I could not properly see, for she was too far away for me to stare at her closely, but even at that distance I noted that they were very large, very dark and fringed with curly lashes. Her whole expression was slightly mocking, and this, for the moment, I could not understand, for if anything, it was she who had cause for disturbance and not myself. After all, I had trapped her there, she had tried to escape and had failed, and yet she found it possible to look at me with that mocking glance, with an expression on her face which seemed to tell me that for the moment she accepted the inevitable and would very much like to know exactly what I proposed to do.

I found that I could not hold her eyes, that I could not continue to stare at her. I realized that perhaps I had been ill-mannered: a fact which I regretted. I realized that I had stared at her in a way which, from her female instincts, she must have recognized, a way which must have told her that I found her not only attractive but very beautiful. I knew that I was totally at a disadvantage in this conversation which must take place between us, and I knew that she realized this fact. Her expression seemed to tell me now that I was to do my worst, but that if I got away with the honours I would well deserve them.

" Why not sit down? " I said. " There's no reason as yet for us to be anything but friends, is there? "

For a moment she looked at me. I think she liked that remark. At any rate, her manner seemed to change almost imperceptibly, as coming over she climbed into the car and sat down. I closed the door and stood beside her, leaning on the wind-screen.

" Well? " she said.

I found it very difficult to know how to begin, but as I looked at her, looked into those unfathomable eyes which seemed to tell me that they held many secrets which, for the moment at least, would certainly not be divulged to me, I suddenly thought that the only way to come to any understanding was to speak the truth.

" Look here," I said. " I'm sorry for locking you into this garage just now. At any rate, I didn't keep you here any longer than I could help."

" No," she admitted slowly, " that is true."

" You knew that I would come back quickly? " I said quietly, and I pointed to the light.

" Yes," she said, " I thought you would."

" Did you know that I had seen you? " I asked.

For a moment she hesitated.

" Only when you locked the door."

She smiled now for the first time, and amazingly her whole face changed: her features were hard, her expression a little sad, but as she smiled the hardness vanished, and it was as though a light had been lit behind her eyes, for they shone and twinkled with an amusement as wholehearted as that of any child.

" What were you doing here? " I asked.

She had not been looking at me, but now she turned and faced me squarely, and her eyes were veiled behind those long, curling lashes.

" Since when," she asked, " has a man had the right to question the movements of a girl? "

" Since any moment," I said quietly, " when she takes it upon herself to be guilty of trespass."

" Is this your garage? " she asked.

" You know very well "—I took this shot in the dark, for I thought it was worth while—" you know very well that it belongs to my uncle."

" Then," she said, " I think you will agree that if he resents it, *he* is the one to take the necessary action."

" Oh," I remarked quietly, " so you mean that if you saw your uncle's ox falling into a well you wouldn't pull it out . . . even on a Sunday? "

For a moment I watched her, and then suddenly she laughed. But her laughter was short-lived, for at once she became serious again and turned to me with quite a new expression on her face.

" This is nonsense," she said slowly. " This is the sort of conversation that might have been reasonable had we met each other in a drawing-room, and been . . ." she hesitated for a second " . . . properly introduced. But . . ."

She paused. Covertly I watched her, trying to convey the impression that I was not particularly interested in her words. Far better, I thought, to let her continue talking so that perhaps she might unwittingly reveal all that I wanted to know; for I felt assured that no questioning would ever obtain the information I sought.

" Well? "

The word was almost rapped out at me, and looking at her again, I noticed that the expression in her eyes was now the same as it had been when first she had spoken: there was something half-mocking in her entire attitude, even to the tilt of her dainty head.

"Well?" she repeated.

So that was no good.

"Who was that little fellow that . . . er . . ."

I stopped. No need to give her information that perhaps she did not know.

"What little fellow?"

There was just a shade too much innocence about the question. I took the plunge.

"Almost as broad as he was long."

I smiled, but she did not respond.

"The little fellow who came into this garage . . . the little fellow whom . . ."

Again I paused, but she did not allow me to evade my difficulty.

"Well?" she said once more.

". . . whom we both watched being arrested."

Just for a second I thought I saw a flicker of pain dart to her eyes; I followed it up quickly.

"On whose side are you?" I asked abruptly.

She looked at me in surprise.

"On whose side am I?" she repeated. "I don't understand."

"Yes, you do." I spoke curtly, imperatively. "Tell me . . . on whose side are you?"

For a long moment she paused and looked at me, and I had the greatest difficulty to refrain from betraying the tumultuous thoughts that raced through my mind: she was staring straight into my eyes and I could not hold that stare, for I realized that some involuntary expression in my own might reveal something which was now my property alone and which, for the moment, at any rate, I had no desire that she should share. But at length her scrutiny came to an end. After a period which could not have lasted longer than seconds, but which to me seemed to endure for many long minutes, she broke the silence with another question.

" You got his message? "

This time I looked at her with genuine astonishment.

" His message? "

" Yes. You heard what he said to you? "

" Were you in the garage then? " I asked, amazed.

" Never mind about that. In any case, I was near enough to hear what he said. You know what he meant? "

Without the slightest hesitation I assumed the rôle which obviously I was intended to play.

" Of course I know what he meant," I said gruffly.

" And yet," said she, " you let him be taken away by those two men . . . away to his . . ."

She paused for a moment.

" Oh, don't let's think of it . . . and all you did was to lock *me* in here. *Me* . . . the only other person who might have helped him."

It was my turn to stare at her and hers to be unable to hold my eyes. Have you ever looked down a well into the dark surface of the water and imagined that something below might be able to tell you a story, possibly of tragedy, and wondered how you could extract it from the unfathomable depths? In just such a way did I stare now into the eyes of this extraordinary girl, striving to probe their blackness to the secrets that lay so surely behind, and in just such a way was I doomed to disappointment. What mysteries those long lashes veiled she was resolved I should not know, and even as I stared she turned her head away.

And then suddenly I decided to take my courage in both hands.

" Money can buy everything," I said.

She started, and turning, looked at me with an expression of real horror on her face. It told me something, but not as much as I had hoped for, and was, in fact, the first slip that she had made throughout the entire conversation: but only for a second did it linger. Almost at once she spoke, and I could not but admire her immense self-control so soon after what—that fleeting glimpse into her eyes had told me—so obviously had been a shock, for her voice was exactly the same as it had been throughout the conversation, and wonder of wonders, it still held that faintly mocking note.

" Do you think so? " she said. " Sometimes an uncomfortable fallacy in which to believe."

I smiled. She smiled. But for the first time, perhaps, there was no friendliness in either of us. Suddenly she seemed to make up her mind. She rose from the seat which she had occupied in my car and I made way for her. Quickly she slipped to the floor of the garage and looked towards the door.

"Am I to be released?" she asked.

"You were never a prisoner," I said.

"That's a lie!"

There was a sudden fire in her voice, a sudden anger, and the colour mounted slightly to her cheeks. I thought that she could scarcely ever have looked more attractive than in that moment.

"You locked me in here. You kept me a prisoner. Is that the way to treat me?"

There was something so imperious in her tone that I felt positively ashamed of myself, although I knew I had acted rightly. After all, why should she, a trespasser, complain of a few moments' curtailment of liberty? She had entered into preserves which were not her own and now resented the very light sentence I had imposed. But I paid no attention to her words. I merely walked to the main door and unlocked it. I then held it open, and the artificial light from the garage streamed out on to the road.

"You are free to go when you like," I said.

"Thank you very much." Her tone was curt. "It is charming of you to be so gallant. I must walk, I suppose?"

I made no answer but opened the doors wider still. I then moved over to my car and started it. I ran it out on to the road, and returning to the garage switched off the light. When I arrived back at the car she was already in the passenger-seat.

"Where to?" I asked.

She nodded in the direction of the nearest town, which I knew to be nearly four miles distant. I let in the clutch and away we went, and I must confess that I let the old car out on that moonlit drive. But when we were still a few hundred yards from the outskirts of the little Scottish town she touched my arm.

"Thank you," she said. "That will do."

I drew up by the side of the road, but I made no attempt to open the door for her.

"You know," I said, "it would be very ungallant of me to leave you here. After all, we're not yet in the town. There might be . . . bandits . . . all sorts of trouble."

She looked at me, and in the darkness I saw that she was smiling.

"It's very kind of you," she said, "to have been so sweet."

And quickly she slipped from the car.

For a moment or two I hesitated, and then I looked at her.

"Referring to that little fellow—" I hesitated again for a second, noticed that her eyes were on mine and went on as lightly as I could, "there are worse places to spend the night than the inside of a prison."

For a few moments she did not reply, and then, looking me straight in the face, she nodded her head.

"Yes," she said, "there are worse places to spend the night than the inside of a prison."

And with that she was gone into the darkness.

I made no attempt to follow her. I turned my car and raced it home. After locking it in the garage I walked back again through the wood to the house. The light was burning in the sitting-room as I had left it: my unfinished glass of beer was still there. I drained it at one gulp, then turned out the light and went upstairs to my room. Automatically I went to bed. But it was some time before slumber relieved my agitated mind. Had I acted rightly? And what was the meaning of that momentary glint of fear which I had so clearly seen flicker for a moment in her wonderful eyes?

And then another thought came to disturb me. I wondered whether, as soon as it was day, I ought to go at once to the police station and discover exactly what had happened to the little man. That he had a message for me was evident: what that message was I dared not think. Once again I seemed to be on the point of being plunged into that maelstrom of disturbing happenings which I had hoped, on leaving Brazil, for ever to have left behind me.

Suddenly I shook myself free of it all. I had returned to England after four years of difficult and delicate work which, through no fault of my own, had been unsuccessful. I had well earned my holiday, and I decided there and then that I would allow no thoughts of the girl, of the little man or of his mysterious message to destroy my peace. And even as I came to this conclusion soothing slumber overcame me.

Very shortly afterwards I was deeply to regret this decision, and to curse myself for my laxity in accepting such an easy way out.

THREE

I WAS rather surprised to see my uncle down for breakfast punctually at nine o'clock on the following morning: surprised and perhaps not too pleased, for he looked anything but well. I had arrived too late on the previous day to see him in the cruel light of morning, and to notice how very much more aged he had become during my absence. I told myself that, after all, this was but natural, but I knew in my heart that he appeared far more lined than he should, and that I had come back to find him changed from the very fit man whom I had left to someone seemingly older than his years. He was curiously silent, too, and he made no reference to the incidents of the previous evening until it was nearly time for me to go down to the golf club. Then he looked at me.

"Alec," he said, "doesn't it strike you as rather surprising that the police have made no move?"

I looked at him: I did not quite know what to answer.

"Didn't one of them say that he'd probably be up in the morning to get particulars?"

" It's early yet," I said.

" Yes," said my uncle musingly, " but all the same, I should have thought that by now . . . Still "—he smiled—" you go off and play your game of golf. I'll tell them all I know. If you're wanted, well then, they can come again later."

I took my clubs from the study, where I had left them on the previous night, and my uncle walked with me to the garage. Curiously enough, as we passed through the rock-garden he made no reference to it: neither did I, although I noticed with what consummate skill those great stones had been placed so as to appear to lie naturally on the sloping bank. In between them—all around, in fact—gaily coloured little rock flowers were in bloom, and these did much to soften the hard, almost cruel outlines of the stones themselves, which in the darkness of the night before was all that I had been able to see. This time, however, the garden had no power to trouble me; in the inspiriting morning light no sinister memories haunted my thoughts.

As I got into the car my uncle stood by the door.

" You'll find Mr. Malcolm waiting for you, I should think," he said. " As we didn't let him know last night he will presume that he is playing with you."

I smiled.

" Right you are."

" I have engaged a caddie for you," said my uncle, just as I went off. "You'll find him waiting for you on the first tee."

As I drove down to the seashore, where the club-house was ideally situated, I wondered at the change in my mood brought about by the incidents which had occurred. Yesterday, right up to the end of dinner, I had been looking forward eagerly to this first round of golf on the old course, promising myself how much I should enjoy it. My mood was different now, however: my brain was worried. I could not fathom the full meaning which lay behind all that had happened.

I reached the club-house and parked the car. Swinging my clubs over my shoulder I walked to the door, but before I entered I handed the bag to the starter. I then went into the club and was greeted with flattering effusion by the steward. It is remarkable how a good steward whom you have known all your life can make much of you when he has not seen you for some little time. It is remarkable, too, how susceptible to flattery is human nature, for I found it extremely pleasing to be greeted in this way. One or two local men whom I knew were about the place, and as these also seemed glad to see me my mood changed very rapidly at the welcome proof which their obvious sincerity gave to me, that perhaps my presence had been missed a little.

The steward's voice interrupted my thoughts:

"Have you got a game, sir?"

"Yes," I said. "I believe I have. My uncle arranged that I should play with a Mr. Malcolm. Is he anywhere about? "

"Yes, sir," said the steward.

He led me to a window which looked out on to the practice putting-green which was just in front of the club-house. A man was amusing himself by putting several balls towards one of the holes.

"That's Mr. Malcolm, sir," he said.

It was too far away for me to see what my partner was really like, but as he was obviously ready, I thanked the steward, prepared myself for the round as quickly as I could, and walked out of the club-house.

As I approached Mr. Malcolm I looked at him curiously. I wondered what sort of a man this was, but his appearance gave me no clue whatsoever. He was dressed in a brown suit of plus-fours which were neither too big nor too skimpy: his stockings were brown and his shoes were brown: he wore on his head a battered Homburg which must have been one of his very oldest friends, and as he looked up I saw that he had a very pleasant face, the sort of face to which one instinctively takes and yet finds very hard indeed to describe. As I neared him he stood waiting for me.

"Captain Graeme? " he asked.

I smiled.

"You are Mr. Malcolm," I said. "I believe my uncle arranged that we should play together."

"Yes," said Mr. Malcolm, "yes."

He paused for a moment, and then he spoke again, his voice very frank and half-apologetic.

"Do you know," he said, "I've no business to be playing with you, Captain Graeme. I'm a very bad golfer indeed, but your uncle suggested that you had no game for this morning and that you were returning from a long absence. He told me what a very good golfer you were."

He smiled. I smiled. I felt that Mr. Malcolm and I were going to get on with each other.

"There may have been a day, Mr. Malcolm," I said, "—about four years ago—when perhaps I could play this game fairly adequately, but I think I have only touched my clubs twice since then."

"Ah!" said Mr. Malcolm, "there's nothing so dangerous as a good player out of practice. However . . . lead me to the slaughter."

Now, as I well knew, there is nothing so dangerous as a man who knows how bad he is, and with a certain inward amusement, I waited for the next move.

"How many strokes are you going to give me?" asked Mr. Malcolm suddenly as we stood by the tee, our names having been called.

I smiled to him.

"What's your handicap?" I asked.

"Sheer lack of talent," said Mr. Malcolm. "But I think if you give me a stroke a hole it might work out about right."

Again I laughed.

" All right," I said.

After all, what did the result of the match matter?

" And I'll play you for a drink," said Mr. Malcolm.

I smilingly agreed.

" Your honour," said Mr. Malcolm. " You're conceding the strokes."

I drove off. I was surprised, frankly, for I hit a very good shot straight down the middle of the course. My clubs felt odd to me, and perhaps that was what helped me on that morning, for I took greater care than I would normally have done if in full practice. In any case, I played extremely well and Mr. Malcolm played extremely ill, although he seemed quite satisfied with his performance when we had completed the round. I think if he had honestly declared a handicap before the round commenced it would have been well beyond the limit accorded by any golf club, but strangely enough he was a delightful opponent to play against, for he was tremendously keen: I have seldom, in fact, seen a man quite so keen. I won somewhat easily, but we played the remaining holes as if the whole world depended on it, and I was quite pleased, although I did not do it on purpose, when I missed a putt on the last green and thus lost the bye; for the pleasure which it gave my opponent was so unaffected and sincere that I felt almost as glad as he. We repaired to the bar, and there Mr. Malcolm, in accordance with our wager, provided me with a glass of beer.

When we had consumed both halves and discussed our match, Mr. Malcolm turned to me:

" Care to give me a lift to the hotel? " he asked.

" Why, certainly."

We left the club together and he sat beside me in my car. I started off. I hesitated only for a few moments: until we were going at a certain speed and had left the precincts of the club behind us.

" Well, Mr. Malcolm? " I said.

" Well, Captain Graeme? " said Mr. Malcolm.

" When I was warned in London," I said quietly, " I laughed at them."

" Did you? " said Mr. Malcolm.

" Yes. I think I may have been stupid to laugh at them."

" It's nearly always stupid," said Mr. Malcolm, " to laugh at Scotland Yard . . . even the Commissioner."

" Who are you exactly? " I asked him suddenly.

" Scotland Yard know of me," said Mr. Malcolm, not without a certain touch of pride in his voice which I noted with amusement. " I am useful to them at times, but this, of course, is a funny sort of case for me. Usually I . . . er . . . well, avenge murders, and that sort of thing."

I laughed, but there was nothing mirthful about my laugh: there was, in fact, some note in it which rather shocked me. It was almost as though I had heard someone else laugh, someone whom I did not know, someone whom I did not think I would have liked at all, for I had heard an extraordinarily cynical sound.

" Mr. Malcolm," I said, " you may yet be avenging a murder; but I must say from all that I have heard about you, I shall be happy to leave my avengement in your hands."

Mr. Malcolm said nothing for a long time, not until, in fact, we were almost at the gates of the hotel.

" Shall I drive on? " I said. " Shall we talk a bit? "

" No," said Mr. Malcolm quickly. " There must be nothing unusual, extraordinary or even faintly out of the ordinary about our relationship. Your uncle asked me to play golf with you in the presence of other people. That was a real stroke of luck. It enabled us to meet very early. Turn in to the gate, man."

I obeyed him instantaneously: I was so interested in his conversation that I had almost missed the entrance to the hotel.

" I think, Captain Graeme," continued Mr. Malcolm quietly, " that I would like you to give me a lesson in golf . . . this evening, say. Will you meet me at the club at about five? "

" Right! " I said.

I looked at the man. There was no sign on his face, nothing in his expression to indicate that our conversation had been other than perfectly normal. I admired Mr. Malcolm in that moment. Evidently he possessed the ability to speak of one thing while looking as though he spoke of another.

I pulled up at the hotel door. He slipped quickly out of the car and held out his hand.

" Thank you so much for the game, Captain Graeme," he said. " I thoroughly enjoyed it. Until five, then."

" Until five."

I drove home thoughtfully.

FOUR

The small hand of my watch was still within five minutes of the appointed hour when I walked out of the club-house late that afternoon and approached the practice putting-green. Punctual though I was, however, I found Mr. Malcolm already there, practising with a deliberation and intensity of purpose which for one moment made me wonder whether indeed this strange man had forgotten our conversation of that morning, so utterly absorbed did he seem in perfecting the smoothness of his stroke. The thought disturbed me, and as I approached I hailed him somewhat curtly. To my mind there was something almost too casual, a hint of indifference about the attitude of this man who, upon the brink of a discussion such as ours promised to be, could become so obviously engrossed in what was, after all, only a game. Resentfully I stared at him . . . but on the instant the resentment vanished, to be replaced by a feeling of puzzled wonder. For even as he lifted his head in answer to my hail I saw the absorption vanish from his face like the sudden shedding of a veil, and upon the moment I realized that here was one of those rare beings, a man whose brain could be pigeon-holed into separate compartments, each of which he could seal at will, so that upon whatever he was engaged at the moment all the energies of his mind were fully directed. The fact pleased me, for I felt that in Mr. Malcolm I had found the very man I sought.

He walked forward to meet me.

"Good afternoon, Captain Graeme," he said genially, "how punctual we both are! Understandable from my point of view"—he laughed—"I don't often get the opportunity of such valuable instruction."

"Nor I for imparting it," I retorted quickly. "There is a strangeness about feeling superior, Mr. Malcolm, which I must say is distinctly refreshing!"

He laughed, and without further words we walked to the first tee.

It was a strange golf-match which followed; one which recalled to my mind very poignantly that other, the strangest of all golf-matches that I had ever played. For even as then, my mind was utterly divorced from the game itself, even as then all my thoughts were completely engrossed with the grim personage of Don Jose Alvares.

At first I was uncertain as to how to begin: my partner's manner continued to be entirely casual, and I found it difficult to embark upon such serious matters. Taking my cue from him, I proceeded to play my rôle of teacher, waiting with barely concealed impatience for our talk to commence. It was not, however, until we were marooned in a difficult bunker, into which purposely, I feel assured, Mr. Malcolm had directed his ball, that he gave the signal.

" Everything from the beginning," he said suddenly, so suddenly indeed that it took me a moment or two in which to realize that my opportunity had now come.

I hesitated.

" The beginning? " I asked.

Mr. Malcolm nodded his head curtly.

" Yes . . . why you went to Brazil in the first place, and all that happened to you there."

" But you know a little about Don Alvares," I said, " surely . . ."

" I know nothing first-hand," interrupted my companion at once, " and I have no interest in anything I hear second-hand. Everything from the beginning, please."

I was silent for a moment, collecting my thoughts and watching my pupil attempting to rescue his ball from the precarious position into which it had been driven. When he had extracted it from the bunker and we were once more moving along the fairway, I began.

" Four years ago," I said, " I was holidaying in Brazil with my friend, Tony Valais. I expect you've heard of him, Mr. Malcolm . . . or perhaps you know him? "

Mr. Malcolm shook his head.

" I have not yet had the pleasure," he said, " but I hope to rectify that omission very soon. I've heard of him, though . . . and very much to his credit. A fine man, by all accounts."

I smiled.

" One of the finest," I said. " I met him during the war . . . he was connected with the French Secret Service, I with the British, and we worked together over some ticklish business behind the Hun lines. We've been fast friends ever since. It was Tony who proposed this holiday in Brazil. He'd lived there for many years, you know . . . long before the war. Without suspecting that more lay behind his invitation than the welcome prospect of some sport, I accepted willingly."

I paused a moment while I played a shot, watched the ball fall a good distance ahead, and then turned back to Mr. Malcolm, who was looking at me thoughtfully.

" So more lay behind it? " he prompted.

I nodded.

" Much more, Mr. Malcolm, very much more . . . and not long after our holiday started, Tony told me his true reason for getting me out there."

We were in a part of the course sheltered from view of the club-house; nobody was about, and should anyone appear, we ourselves would be the first to see them. As though prompted by the selfsame thought, both of us stopped walking and faced each other eagerly.

"And what was that?" he asked.

"To gather together sufficient proof of his infamy to destroy that plague that was rotting Brazil . . . Don Jose Alvares," I said grimly.

Mr. Malcolm stared at me intently but he said no word.

"In Santa Therese, a few miles from Rio, a very fine viaduct had been built, spanning the River Aqua, some months before I came to the country," I went on quickly. "It took years to erect and cost the Government of Brazil many thousands. No sooner was it completed, however, than something went wrong . . . nobody quite knows what . . . the viaduct was destroyed, the water flooded the countryside, and many small villages were entirely submerged. The loss of life and property was appalling. There was general lamentation at the calamity . . . out of which, of course, no one profited save the engineering firm which received a contract from the Government to provide another viaduct.

"A few months passed, and then another catastrophe, or rather a series of catastrophes, darkened the face of Brazil. Mysterious explosions took place . . . more loss of life and property . . . and always by some unlucky chance some important engineering plant, such as a waterworks, railway or bridge, was utterly destroyed. These things, of course, had to be reconstructed by the only important engineering firm of Brazil."

I paused and looked at Mr. Malcolm. He nodded his head thoughtfully.

" Looks like dynamite," he suggested quietly.

" Was dynamite," I repeated curtly. " A train of dynamite skilfully tunnelled into the earth with an elaborate timing device . . . that is what Tony and I eventually discovered. It was done so cleverly, however, that it took us a considerable time to get any proof."

" Ah, and so you *did* get proof? " asked Mr. Malcolm quickly.

I smiled: but my smile was very bitter.

" Yes," I said slowly, " we did get proof . . . but we got it too late."

I paused, while for a moment my thoughts flew back to our brief interview with a certain Brazilian minister a few weeks ago, an interview which had assured us only too clearly as to the fact of his treachery. " Money can buy everything "—well, there was one man in Brazil who had testified to the cynical truth that lay behind the saying, and even now my breath came fast with anger as I thought of it. Mr. Malcolm waited patiently for a few moments, but then he prompted me.

" Who first suspected that all these calamities were not Acts of God? " he asked quietly.

" A certain Brazilian minister — one Sebastian Manoel," I said quickly. " A clever man . . . a very clever man "—I laughed cynically—" a man who is certain not to fail in this world whatever he does in the next. He realized soon enough that God had little to do with these terrible disasters . . . that rather were they the Acts of the Devil . . . the devil in the person of Don Jose Alvares."

Mr. Malcolm smiled.

"Again that name," he said. "It keeps recurring like the refrain in a sea-shanty of the Spanish Main! I am wondering how you came to be so certain that Don Jose Alvares was the moving hand. Surely a very difficult thing to prove?"

I nodded.

"Very," I said, "*very*. As soon as Manoel had appointed Tony to the job of discovering what he could . . . it was not done quite so openly as that, of course. Manoel applied to the French Government for Tony's help: Tony wanted me as his ally, and I was unofficially lent by the British Government to that of Brazil. Well, we set to work, and it took us four years to get the proof . . . four years of hell. For all the while, Mr. Malcolm, these disasters kept occurring . . . it was as though a plague covered the land . . . that it was accursed. No one knew where the hand would strike next; no one could find any trace to suggest that the hand was a human one . . . the people seemed to think that the Day of Judgment had come to pass. And it was all the work of one man . . ."

"Don Jose Alvares." Mr. Malcolm forestalled me with a smile. But the next moment he was serious again. " But exactly why? What impelled him to do it all? "

" A ghastly craving for money and power, Mr. Malcolm," I said gravely. " He holds the devil's creed—' Money can buy everything ' . . . and it's certainly bought him a lot. He owns all the engineering firms of Brazil . . . therefore, every calamity brought him in thousands. Money begets money . . . this infamous profit on wholesale destruction has contrived to make Don Alvares at the moment the richest and most powerful man in Brazil."

" And I suppose his craving for power was admirably fed by the havoc he wrought," said Mr. Malcolm thoughtfully.

I glanced at him swiftly. Unerringly this strange man had seized upon the grim key to the whole situation, for I felt assured that it was this deadly craving which, more than all else, had led Alvares on his march of destruction. As a drug-taker yearns for opium, so had Alvares yearned for power: the desire for it lay like a fever in his veins, a diabolic hunger which could be appeased only by the sacrifice to his insatiable greed of life and property. The man, like a monster juggernaut, had ravaged the country for many years until the whole was in subjection to him. I shivered at the thought and turned to the man beside me, who so quickly had grasped at the salient fact. There was an intent look in his eyes, thoughtful and intent, but even as I watched him this vanished, and once again he was the genial, smiling Mr. Malcolm who had met me on the putting-green not so very long before. Casually he took a swing at his club and then he turned to me.

"Perhaps I might master the secret if you showed me once again," he said.

I stared at him in amazement. So engrossed had I become in the tale I was relating that it took me a few seconds to realize to what he was referring. Then understanding came to me. Casually swinging my club, I pointed out a few of the most glaring errors in his swing, and as I did so I glanced swiftly towards the course behind. It was as I thought. Two men were now within sight, and to remain any longer in our present position engaged in serious talk might provoke comment. With the same casualness I drove a ball, and we set off in pursuit of it.

"But you say you discovered proof of Alvares's activities . . . and yet you were too late," said Mr. Malcolm after a pause.

I nodded.

"Yes, Mr. Malcolm," I said. "After four years of spying as dangerous as any either of us had ever done in the war, we found out what we wanted. Everything Sebastian Manoel had required as proof we had managed to discover. A brilliant success . . . that is what we thought . . . but the devil had been cleverer than we had."

I paused, and for the benefit of the two men behind

I gave my partner some demonstrative instructions, and then I went on:

" Don Jose had discovered what we were up to, and relying upon the infallibility of his creed, he'd scotched the sleeping snake before we could wake it to action. He paid off Sebastian Manoel."

I was silent, and for a while neither of us spoke. Mr. Malcolm, I felt, realized a little of the bitter disappointment from which Tony Valais and I had so deeply suffered. It had been no pleasant thing to watch the fruits of four years' dangerous labour trampled so wantonly underfoot. My thoughts were sombre and I was glad when Mr. Malcolm at last interrupted them.

" Did you meet Alvares yourself? " he asked.

I laughed.

" I did," I said, " in fact we forcibly became his guests . . . but unfortunately we were obliged to leave him rather unexpectedly without even bidding him good-bye. I'm afraid he must have thought us rather rude."

Mr. Malcolm smiled.

" You were taken prisoner, I gather, and you managed to escape. Is that it? "

I nodded, and in a few words I told him of all that had occurred since that moment when, during our march back in the great Brazilian forest, we had realized that we were being pursued. I told him of our parting in the ruined hut, of my own tedious march, of my capture, of the grim awakening in the prison of Alvares and of my meeting there with Valais. As eloquently as I could I described to him the extraordinary personage that was Don Jose Alvares. I told him of the man's insulting bribe, of the adroit method by which Tony had directed we could accept the money while yet preserving our honour, and with the money purchase our way to freedom. I described the manner in which we had achieved this. Again I saw that fantastic golf-course and the great rocks surrounding it, again I heard the cry of our guard as he fell stricken to the ground when the ball had hit him. I told of our mad dash to the canoe upon the river and of that fleeting glimpse I had caught of the girl upon the bank. But as I recalled her face, for some reason unknown to me I fell silent; there was something about the memory of her beauty which disturbed me profoundly.

For a moment or so neither of us spoke, and then Mr. Malcolm prompted me gently.

" So you got away? " he said.

I smiled.

" Yes . . . we got away, in spite of Don Jose and in spite of the alligators. I shall never forget that river, Mr. Malcolm, to my dying day. The place simply teemed with hungry alligators, and at every moment I felt assured that one of us was about to be precipitated into their jaws. And then the rapids . . . no wonder that river isn't supposed to be navigable. Having successfully navigated it I'm most emphatic on that point—it was never meant for any but the alligators! Hair-pin bends and wild dashes down never-ending rapids . . . whirlpools . . . those ghastly monsters . . . and all the while the current dashing us along at a tremendous speed. Not a companionable river, Mr. Malcolm, not by any means."

Mr. Malcolm laughed.

" But a very friendly one to you both," he pointed out.

" It saved our lives," I agreed at once, and for a while I was silent, thinking again of that extraordinary river, so tempestuous, so fraught with danger, of whose name I was even now ignorant, which had played so momentous a part in both our lives.

Absently I applied myself to an iron shot, absently I swung my club, and with a total lack of interest watched the little white ball leap through the air and come to rest at last among some gorse-bushes that fringed the green. Picking up my clubs I walked with Mr. Malcolm towards the place where it had fallen, but all the while my thoughts were far away.

Suddenly my partner interrupted them.

" And where did the river take you? " he asked.

I turned to him at once and continued my tale quickly.

" To within fifty miles of Rio," I said. " When we got within sight of civilization, we left the river and covered the rest of the way by land. In paying off the Indian Tony did something which I thought very fine. I told you about my scruples regarding our use of the money: well, when Tony handed the envelope to the Indian he showed me the name written on it. It was his own. 'You see, Alec,' he said, 'you might have had scruples about having brought the money even as far as this. I have none. Your money was paid out at the Alvares fortress. I, therefore, am solely responsible for this part of the affair.' Rather fine of him, wasn't it?"

Mr. Malcolm nodded thoughtfully.

"It was a delicate point," he said. "Every man's conscience has its own intricate pattern of lights and shades. I like the sound of your friend, Captain Graeme. Not every man would be at such pains to preserve the harmony of another's pattern. Yes . . . I would very much like to meet Mr. Valais."

"You shall," I said quickly; "just as soon as I can get him down here . . . which should be within a day or so now. Well . . . to continue my story. When we arrived at Rio we had an interview with His Excellency Sebastian Manoel and found it was all only too true . . . he had been well paid off. The interview was not a pleasant one . . . I feel that our friend Manoel will not easily forget some of the caustic things Tony and I remarked to him. And then we beat a hasty retreat. We felt it would have been quite in keeping with his character for Manoel to have had us arrested, in order to gain still further doubloons from the purse of Don Jose. We arranged a passage on a tramp-steamer sailing for Europe that very evening, but before we left Tony and I paid a visit to a telephone-box."

I laughed. Mr. Malcolm raised his eyebrows inquiringly.

"We rang up a certain man whose interests were centred upon a bridge at present being built near Rio, and warned him of the crash which was perpending. We left a very frantic and voluble man on the other side of the 'phone . . . and then we embarked for home."

"And did your warning save the bridge?" asked Mr. Malcolm quickly.

I smiled. Here, at least, I felt, our efforts had met with success.

"I rather think it did," I said, "although Tony was so doubtful that we could do any good. But I've heard no news of any set-back to it yet. In fact, I believe it is regarded as one of the greatest engineering triumphs of Brazil. It certainly was our one and only triumph. Anyway, we set sail that night for Europe and eventually landed at Lisbon, where Tony left me. He covered the rest of the journey to France overland. As soon as I got to London I went to the Foreign Office and told them everything . . . not that it was of much avail. So long as Manoel is in power their hands are completely tied. With another government in Brazil, however, things may be different."

Mr. Malcolm nodded thoughtfully.

"Yes," he said. "Alvares may find things will be very different. And that was all the Foreign Office could do for you? Not extremely promising!"

"Not promising at all," I agreed. "They did a little more, however. They warned me that several discreet inquiries were being made as to my whereabouts . . . had been made for the past few weeks. Knowing nothing about me, they were luckily unable to supply any news. They've promised to continue in this state of blissful ignorance, and they cautioned me to take a holiday somewhere and let them know when I was anxious to start again on some other job. It's years since I worked for them, you know. I haven't done so, as a matter of fact, since the war. As soon as I left the office I hired a car and left that night for Scotland."

"They rang me up that afternoon," said Mr. Malcolm.

"I gathered that," I smiled, "for they also rang me and told me they were worried for my safety. They said you would act as . . . bodyguard."

I laughed. It all sounded so fantastic in peaceful Scotland, and then my thoughts flew back to the night before . . . to the garage . . . to the girl. . . .

Mr. Malcolm broke in just as I was about to speak, and I changed my mind.

"How do you impart backspin with a mashie?" he asked suddenly.

I told him: then I paused a moment and frowned involuntarily: there had been certain incidents in my car journey north which had troubled me, incidents innocent enough in themselves yet which, in conjunction with each other, built up a wall of suspicious evidence which I could not entirely reject. I felt I should like to tell these to my bodyguard, even if I kept the girl to myself.

I turned to Mr. Malcolm solemnly.

"On the way up," I said, "I was followed."

Mr. Malcolm's eyes narrowed instantaneously but he said no word.

"I am convinced of that," I went on seriously. "There was a little blue car which, without ever passing me or nearing me sufficiently to be obvious, trailed me all the way. I tried to shake it off repeatedly. At last, when I reached Perth, I decided to take a room for the night and continue my journey next day. I was having dinner in a small dining-room which overlooked the garage. My table was near the window and suddenly I saw a man furtively walk towards the garage and enter it. At once I left the table and went to investigate. By the time I reached it, however, the garage was empty, but I found that the locks of a case I had left in my car had obviously been tampered with."

"Was anything missing from it?" asked Mr. Malcolm.

"From the case? No, nothing at all," I replied, "but I had only a few clothes and toilet necessities with me . . . nothing that could possibly have interested anyone else. Well, I decided that the sooner I continued my journey the better. I very much disliked the thought of sleeping in that inn now that my presence there was known, so I paid off the landlord, and, much to his surprise, informed him that I had decided to drive through the night. I got away to a clear stretch of road and was congratulating myself on having shaken them off, when I heard the engine of a car in the distance behind me. There was a moon and I could see the car clearly . . . it was the same blue sports model that had been chasing me before. After that I tried repeatedly to shake it off, but there wasn't a hope."

I paused for a moment and then suddenly made up my mind: it was childish, since Mr. Malcolm had been delegated to act as my bodyguard, not to tell him everything. God knows I wanted peace, and perhaps this man could give it to me. I think there must have been a graver, more urgent note in my voice then, for at once Mr. Malcolm turned and looked at me sharply.

"And there was another thing," I said; "it happened last night. . . . I . . ."

But before I could continue, Mr. Malcolm lifted his hand quickly and stemmed my words.

"Don't tell me any more now," he said. "Our lesson has already taken far too long. If your presence up here is known, it's all the more necessary that we should be circumspect. To-morrow morning, perhaps, I may have the pleasure of another game with you?"

His voice had risen at the last words and at once I guessed the reason. Without my realizing how near we had approached it, we were already within a few yards of the club-house and the last tee. One or two couples were playing within earshot of us, and the need for caution was paramount.

I smiled at Mr. Malcolm.

"Delighted," I said. "Shall we say the same time . . . ten to-morrow?"

We parted then, and with a mind charged heavily with the memories which my own words to him had evoked, I went in search of my car and then drove back swiftly to my home.

FIVE

AFTER returning the car to the garage I walked slowly along the avenue of trees leading to the house, my mind a prey to complex thoughts. That I had done wisely in making Mr. Malcolm fully cognizant of the whole affair I felt convinced. I was not so assured, however, that in agreeing with his decision to defer the relation of the rest of my tale until the morrow I had been quite so wise. Mr. Malcolm, after all, could have had no suspicion as to that baffling episode within the garage, the ending to which had been so dramatic: might there not, perhaps, have been an urgency about this incident which should have made it imperative for me to disregard caution and insist that our conversation should have been prolonged a little longer? Had not that caution been too dearly bought?

Moodily I walked up the path, and it was with a feeling of annoyance that I saw a tall figure walking down the slope to meet me. It was my uncle, and this at a moment when of all people I least desired to talk to him. I had a longing for solitude: there were many things I had to get clear in my mind before I could take any interest in another's affairs, and with my uncle I feared lest this obvious absent-mindedness might cause him pain. I forced myself to smile a welcome, however, but as we neared each other I was able to see the expression on his face, and on the instant I realized that something had happened. He was smiling curiously, roguishly almost, and his eyes as they met mine were bright with interest.

" Where did you meet her? " he asked, when we were still distant a few yards from each other.

I stared at him blankly.

" Meet who? "

" That beautiful girl," he said.

He had reached my side now, and turning, began to move back with me. I stared at him in surprise.

" What girl? " I asked. " Who on earth are you talking about? "

He laughed.

" The girl who is at the moment awaiting your arrival in the sitting-room," he retorted. " The girl whose looks, separately distributed around, would make all the women in this county passably good-looking. Where on earth did you meet her, Alec? "

I stopped dead in my tracks and stared at him aghast.

" D'you mean to tell me," I said, " that someone . . . a girl . . . is waiting for me in the house? "

My uncle had paused also, and now the smile began to fade slowly from his face as he noted my concern.

" Yes," he said, " she's been waiting for you for about ten minutes. A Miss Lindsey. She said she was a friend of yours and that you were expecting her."

"*Expecting* her?"

But a sudden solution occurred to me. For a moment my heart missed a beat and then raced on at redoubled speed. I made no attempt to conceal the excitement in my voice.

"Is she dark . . . very tall . . . with rather nice eyes?" I asked.

He smiled.

"With quite *marvellous* eyes," he corrected me.

Even before I had heard my uncle's reply I knew I had guessed aright. No one but my visitor of the previous night would ever have had the effrontery to assert so coolly that she was expected. Her audacity defeated me and I laughed outright.

My uncle regarded me curiously.

"Weren't you really expecting her?" he asked, and there was a note of uneasiness in his voice which I made haste to dispel.

"Yes, of course I was . . . but not quite so soon."

I started to walk quickly up the slight slope leading to the house, all eagerness now to meet this fair intruder. My uncle fell into step by my side.

"But who is she?" he asked. "Why has she come?"

I laughed again. Those were the very two questions that were puzzling me: he little knew how much I longed to have them answered.

" I'll tell you later," I promised rashly, " afterwards, when she's gone. I can't keep her waiting any longer."

For a fleeting moment I wondered just how I was to wriggle out of the dilemma in which the coming of this girl had placed me, how I was to satisfy the curiosity she had evoked in my uncle's mind. Short of telling him the truth—all that I knew of it—explanation was difficult . . . and the truth was the one thing he must not know. I brushed the problem momentarily away as I entered the house and moved towards the room to which she had been taken.

I was surprised to find my hand was shaking as I felt for the door-handle. I paused a moment before I turned it, and then, with a suddenness which subconsciously, perhaps, I hoped might give me the advantage of surprise, I thrust the door open and entered the room.

I paused on the threshold and stared with mixed feelings at its one occupant. My attempt at surprise was childishly futile, and for a moment I felt abashed and curiously embarrassed as I guessed, from the amused smile on my visitor's lips, that my intention had been only too clear to her.

She was stretched at her ease in a deep arm-chair before the fire, her only movement on my entry being to turn her head and smile at me in that mocking way which I found so galling. Even in that moment of uneasiness I did not fail to admire the picture she made leaning back so gracefully in the chair, her head bare of any covering, dark against the silk of the yellow cushion beneath it. In one glance I took in the details of her costume and the dainty, brogue-clad feet upon the fender. Absurdly small they looked: and even as I walked forward to greet her I found some part of my mind intent upon the problem of their size.

She did not move as I neared her, but merely held out her hand smilingly for me to grasp. In silence I took it: in silence, with a vague hope of disconcerting her, I moved to the chair opposite her own and sat down in it. Like two antagonists alone in the arena, we eyed each other dubiously. For one moment a puzzled expression flashed to her eyes, but the next it was gone and that mocking smile was back upon her lips. But still she did not speak. I had been resolved she should be the first to start the combat, but unable to retain this mute battle any longer, I was compelled to surrender forthwith. The silence had begun to merge on the ridiculous. I leant forward in my chair and watched her intently.

" So I was expecting you? " I said.

She laughed, a laugh so spontaneous and gay that the sound delighted me.

" Weren't you? " she asked.

I smiled back at her.

" I was," I said, " but hardly so soon."

My reply must have surprised her, for something flashed swiftly to her eyes and was dispelled on the instant.

" And why did you think we should meet again? "

she asked, and this time there was no hint of raillery in her voice: she was merely asking a straight question.

I paused a mòment before replying, and then I smiled again. This time, I felt, the honours were with me.

" Dame Fortune is a kindly old lady," I said, " who has rarely let me down. I felt convinced she wouldn't have the heart to let you vanish from my life for ever."

There was a strange expression on her face as she replied, half-laughing, half-grave:

" Perhaps," she said, " you will find in a little while that this is one of the times when . . . she has let you down."

I raised my eyebrows in mock protest.

" You know," I said, " for such a very beautiful young woman you are strangely humble, Miss Lindsey. And by the way," I added quickly, " is that your real name? "

Her smile was wholly provocative now.

" You know," she said, " for such an adventurous young man you are strangely trusting. And . . . yes, it does happen to be my real name . . . over here."

" Over here? " I questioned lightly.

She nodded.

" In Brazil I use my father's . . . over here my mother's name. You see, my mother was a Scot."

She paused, and for a moment I waited breathlessly. I felt that perhaps now, after that passage of light fencing, she was about to reveal her identity to me, to fling away pretence and place all her cards upon the table, telling me why she had come. My hope was a wild one, however, and soon to be shattered.

Suddenly she laughed, a hard laugh, very different from her spontaneous merriment of a little while before.

" The past four years should have taught you to mask your thoughts a little better, Captain Graeme," she said. " No—I am not about to wax confidential. I'm afraid I disappoint you! "

I got up restlessly and moved to a box of cigarettes that stood on the mantelpiece. I handed it to her and held a light for her cigarette. I took one myself, lit it, and moved to the bell.

" What will you have to drink, Miss Lindsey? " I asked.

There was a pause for a moment, and then:

" It is very kind of you," she said. " If you insist . . . a glass of sherry."

I stared at her in relieved surprise, for even as I had asked the question I remembered my uncle's innate aversion to the modern vice of cocktails, and the probability that the cellars below contained no ingredients for their formation. What had prompted her choice, I wondered? Mere chance, or was it a quick appreciation of character in that short time in which she had spoken with my uncle? If so, this girl must be adroit in the summing-up of human nature; well-versed in that art, most valuable of all, the strange workings of the minds of men. The thought was alarming, and as I pressed the bell I stared with something like apprehension at the slim form before me. What had she come for? What did she know? Would she never state the reason for her visit? Something within me rebelled from asking that question openly, but as she had stated, I felt that the expression on my face must be only too eloquent.

The butler opened the door and I ordered the drinks. In a very little while he had brought them, and we were alone once more, but during the interval of waiting neither of us broke the silence. I filled two glasses, handed her one, and then raised my own and smiled towards her.

" I will give you a toast," I said. " To the lady who waved us farewell by a certain very unpleasing river in Brazil."

She smiled thoughtfully at me, and then she shook her head.

" I can't very well drink to myself," she objected. " Remember—you told me a moment ago that I was humble. Why not drink to your friend . . . the river? "

I raised my glass.

" To the river," I said solemnly. " May all its alligators have lengthy lives." I laughed suddenly. " And go hungry. Tell me," I said, " why did you wave to us? Why didn't you try to stop us? "

It was a question that had occurred to me many times in the days that had followed our flight, a question which, in some way, I felt to be vital.

The girl was looking at me gravely: there was no hint of mockery now.

"Candidly," she said, and her tone was serious, "I really don't quite know . . . I've wondered about that myself a lot. I suppose I rather liked your spirit. I admire audacity."

I looked at her thoughtfully. At last I took the plunge.

"It has made me wonder on whose side you are," I said. "You *are* a friend of Don Jose, aren't you?"

She was silent, staring at me solemnly with those unfathomable eyes. I tried to goad her into speech.

"But I suppose," I went on blandly, "money can buy everything?"

A spot of red jumped to her cheeks, her lips set in a hard, straight line, her eyes glowed angrily. She opened her mouth to make a hasty retort, and then she closed it tight. For a second she was silent, and then, recovering herself, she moved glibly away from the trap into which so nearly she had fallen.

"Do you think so?" she said. "Sometimes an uncomfortable fallacy in which to believe."

She replied in the very same words she had used to me on the night before when first I had ventured the question. I groaned inwardly in disappointment. Were we never to come out in the open? Was this fencing behind hedges to continue indefinitely? At last I felt the moment had come for me to sink my pride, to demand that this trifling should cease, that she should state once and for all the reason for her coming. I hesitated a moment more—there was a discourtesy in broaching such a question—but finally curiosity won and I turned to her.

" Won't you tell me now, Miss Lindsey," I said, " why you are here? "

I had spoken seriously enough, but the girl refused to fall in with my mood. She laughed suddenly, disconcertingly, but there was a note of friendliness in her laughter which I found reassuring.

" Doesn't it occur to you," she said banteringly, " that the charm of your wonderful personality might have inspired me to pay you a call? "

I shook my head, but try as I might I could not prevent a smile from creeping to my face.

" No," I said firmly, " it doesn't occur to me at all . . . nor to you, either. Tell me, Miss Lindsey, why are you here? "

She was silent a moment, watching me intently with those marvellous, unfathomable eyes, but suddenly she took a last pull at her cigarette, threw the end into the fire, and leant forward towards me in her chair.

" You've been very patient with me, Captain Graeme, and I've been most unkind. If you'll give me another cigarette—my own case is empty—I promise to tell you everything . . . or, rather," she smiled, " all you need to know."

Quickly I gave her a cigarette and lit it for her, then:

" Another drink? " I suggested.

But she shook her head at once.

" No, thank you," she said, " nothing more. Now come and sit down again and I'll begin."

I walked over to the chair and seated myself in it. I took another cigarette, lit it, and stared at her thoughtfully through the mist of smoke that coiled between us. She was silent for a moment, as though collecting her thoughts, but suddenly she turned to me and threw her bombshell.

" You and your friend should feel complimented," she said. " Don Jose Alvares is here . . . I mean in London."

My heart missed a beat. Momentarily my fingers tightened on the stem of my cigarette, but my face was under complete control, and I steeled myself to stare at her coolly. My demeanour seemed to astonish, almost to disconcert her.

" You knew this? " she asked, and her voice sounded puzzled.

I answered non-committally in as light a tone as I could assume in the moment.

" Tony Valais and I are honoured by his interest," I said. " Providing, of course, that we really form the reason for his coming."

She looked at me curiously.

" Do you doubt that? " she asked.

I shrugged my shoulders. Not for a moment did I doubt it, but I was loth to admit it to her.

For a few moments there was a pause, and then she turned to me and her eyes narrowed thoughtfully as she spoke.

"I was wondering," she said, "whether you and your friend would like to meet him."

Nothing was farther from my desires: there was, in fact, nothing I would have liked less to do. And she knew it: I felt convinced she must know it. What fantastic scheme was being evolved within the tortuous mind behind that lovely face? I stared at her in perplexity, utterly unable to decide upon an answer. At last, feeling that my one course was to temporize, I turned the question back on her.

"I am wondering whether he would like to meet us," I said lightly.

She smiled.

"Can you doubt it?" she said, and there was a spark of real amusement in her eyes. "I was under the impression that Don Jose valued your company highly!"

We both laughed.

"He did—too highly," I said. "He could never make up his mind to say good-bye."

There was a pause, and then she suddenly picked up a little red morocco handbag that had lain upon her knee. Opening it, she withdrew two pieces of yellow card. I watched her curiously. She looked up at me again, and her face was serious.

"Next Thursday a great gathering of Brazilians are to meet in London in honour of Don Jose," she said. "The meeting takes place at the Florian Hall . . . admission by invitation only. Invitation tickets are very difficult to obtain. I was wondering whether you and your friend would like to be there. In case you should, I have brought you two tickets."

She handed me the two pieces of yellow card.

Dazedly I took them from her, dazedly I glanced at them, but the writing swam together before my eyes. The audacity of this strange young woman left me speechless. Did she seriously imagine that Tony Valais and I, having, with the greatest pains, managed to elude successfully the vengeance of this monstrous man, would join in any party held to honour him? For a moment or two I stared fixedly at the tickets, as though striving to wrest from them the secret of their bestowal. I kept my eyes averted from her face for as long as I was able, and then, hoping that my own were as expressionless as hers, I looked at her calmly.

"It is very kind of you, Miss Lindsey," I said slowly. "I will discuss the matter with my friend. Of course, Don Jose knows we have been asked?"

She rose slowly from her chair and drew her coat closely around her. The action was unexpected, and as I rose to my feet I watched her in perplexity. She threw her half-smoked cigarette into the fire, and then turned to me laughingly.

"Now there's a fine problem for you to think out, Captain Graeme," she said. "Were the invitations sent at Don Jose's instigation . . . or did I, thinking it might amuse you to be there, go to the trouble of getting them for you myself?"

She laughed again and held out her hand.

"Good-bye," she said.

I looked at her in consternation. She was really going away, leaving me in this state of desperate bewilderment. The fact could not be tolerated, and throwing my pride to the winds, I turned to her imploringly.

"But you can't possibly go like that," I said. "I had hoped you might join us for dinner. Surely you could . . ."

"I am sorry, Captain Graeme," she interrupted firmly. "I'm afraid I can't. It's very kind of you to ask me though . . . some other time, perhaps. Good-bye . . . until next Thursday."

"Will you be there?" I asked, not because I had any doubts that she might be absent, but merely to prolong our conversation a little longer. Now that she was about to depart, I felt a strong desire to delay her going.

She smiled at me strangely.

"I might," she said, ". . . and again, who knows . . . I might not!"

I felt an urgent longing to take her in my arms and shake her until she really gave me a straight reply.

"Has anybody ever told you," I said, "what an abominably evasive, provoking and altogether aggravating young woman you are?"

She raised her eyebrows expressively, and, still smiling, took one step towards the door. There she stopped and, turning, looked at me: the smile had vanished from her face now, and there was something in her expression which I could not quite define.

"By the way," she said, "didn't that policeman say he would come round this morning to interview you about the man in your garage?"

I looked at her in surprise: her change of subject momentarily confused me. My thoughts flew back to the night before.

"Yes," I said wonderingly. "Why?"

"Well, has he come yet?" she asked.

There was a note in her voice which told me that no idle curiosity dictated the question. A sudden excitement made my heart beat faster.

"I don't know," I said. "He didn't come this morning, but he may have later. I've just got back from the golf club, you see. I'll ask my uncle."

I took a step forward, but she shook her head quickly.

"I shouldn't bother to do that," she said, "only . . . if he hasn't been . . . well, it *is* a little peculiar, isn't it?"

With that she was gone.

In a stride she had reached the door, opened and closed it behind her, and a few seconds later I heard quick steps upon the gravel path outside. I made no attempt to follow her, however. Her last parting shot had been barbed with a certain significance which, in some vague way, filled me with alarm. If the policeman had not come, it was indeed a strange state of affairs. I stood motionless as she had left me, staring at the faded pattern of the carpet, trying to solve the mystery behind her words. "It is a little peculiar, isn't it?" The stress she had placed upon the word "peculiar" invested it with a dramatic, with almost a tragic, quality. I moved quickly to the telephone that stood upon a desk in the corner of the room, and lifting the receiver asked for a number. I was reluctant to ask my uncle if the constable had called, reluctant to allude again to the events of the night before. And, apart from this, deep in my heart I knew that no policeman had been here to-day.

In a very little while I was connected with the police-station.

"Hullo! Is that the police?"

A gruff voice assured me that it was.

"Who is that speaking?" I asked.

"Sergeant MacAndrew, sir."

"Well, Sergeant MacAndrew," I said, "this is Captain Graeme speaking. I was wondering why you hadn't come to talk to me about the man you arrested in my garage last night."

There was a pause, then:

"Did you say a man was arrested in your garage, sir?"

The voice sounded puzzled.

"Yes," I said, and as I spoke my own inward misgivings increased perceptibly. "A little man, very broad, as broad as he was long, in fact . . . you arrested him last night in my garage."

"Just a moment, sir."

There was an interval during which a thousand surmisings thronged my brain.

Suddenly another voice spoke, a voice obviously that of a superior officer, for it was authoritative and abrupt.

"This is Inspector McClure speaking, Captain Graeme. Would you mind giving me the description of the man you say was arrested in your garage last night?"

I repeated the description, making it as detailed as I could: I laid particular emphasis upon the fact of the man's extraordinary breadth of shoulder.

There was a pause, and then the Inspector spoke again, and there was a note of suppressed excitement in his voice which made my pulse beat faster.

"I wonder if you would be kind enough to spare me a moment if I came along to see you now, Captain Graeme?" he said. "I shouldn't keep you very long."

"Certainly," I said, "come as soon as you like. You want to discuss the arrest?"

"Hardly that," came the voice calmly. "You see, we don't know anything about having arrested a man in your garage last night; but a man answering to the description you have just supplied was found murdered this morning in a wood off the Inverness road."

He rang off instantly, and from my nerveless fingers the receiver fell, hanging limp from its cord.

SIX

For a moment or two I let it rest, staring blankly at the twisted flex as it swayed to and fro against the wall. The sudden shock of the Inspector's words had temporarily numbed my brain, but even as the haze of an early summer morn evaporates with the eventual coming of day, so did the mist in my mind gradually clear, and dimly I was able to perceive the full significance of the news I had been told. At once one thing was apparent: the waters over which I sailed were far more deep and perilous than I had ever dreamed. I had believed, on leaving Brazil, that my adventures were behind me: on reaching Scotland I found that they had only just begun.

My hand shook with excitement as at last I picked up the receiver once more. I did not replace it on the hook, however, but pressing it repeatedly with my finger, I waited until I was through to the exchange. I then gave a number, and in a very little while the voice of the reception-clerk at the hotel to which I had driven Mr. Malcolm sounded in my ears.

"Hullo!"

" Hullo! " I said quickly. " Links Hotel? "

" Yes, sir."

" I want to speak to Mr. Malcolm, please."

" Yes, sir. Who's speaking, sir? "

" Captain Graeme."

" Hold the line a moment, sir."

I waited for what could have been little longer than a minute or two but which, in my state of nervous tension, seemed to be prolonged interminably, and my last shreds of patience were fast departing when at last the cool tones of Mr. Malcolm's voice came to me over the wire.

" Hullo! Is that Captain Graeme? "

" Yes," I said eagerly. " Mr. Malcolm, I want you to . . ."

But before I could complete my sentence he interrupted me quickly.

" I'm sorry I haven't let you know about it before," he said. " I suppose you rang up in regard to that little business matter we were discussing . . ."

" I . . . I don't think . . ." I broke in dazedly, but at once, and this time with a suggestion of authority in his tone which silenced me instantly, he continued briskly.

" I quite agree, Captain Graeme," he said, " it is rather difficult to understand . . . far too complicated to discuss over the telephone, anyway. I'm going to accept your kind invitation and dine with you to-night. Shall I come along at once? "

Even as he spoke the neatness of his manœuvre filled my mind with admiration. Whether he knew already the grim news I had been eager to impart, or whether it was a mere regard for elementary caution which had prompted him to stem my words, I could not guess, but in either case his quick command of the situation was but another demonstration of the man's resource. I smiled to myself as I replied, a smile of self-congratulation, for deep in my heart I knew I had done well in securing this man's interest.

"Yes, of course . . . that will be splendid," I said. "Come along at once."

"Do you mind if I don't change?"

Again I smiled. The question, coming at that particular moment, sounded almost grotesque: an urgent meeting to discuss such serious matters seemed hardly the time for an insistence upon conventional garb, but even as I gave an assurance I realized that the question had been put in all sincerity. I felt that to this extraordinary man no happening, however momentous, would ever have power to upset that innate sense of proportion which made him refuse to be hustled by any event out of the courtesies of everyday life. Again I remembered his complete absorption in the perfection of a golf-stroke even while he awaited me for what, I feel assured, he regarded as a most important appointment, and as I bade him good-bye and hung up the receiver, my heart felt suddenly lightened. Mr. Malcolm, it seemed, was but another Tony

Valais in his utter indifference to the disturbing elements in life. The abnormal became normal, the exception customary under the regard of his immovable calm, a calm which diffused a sense of security that I found immensely reassuring.

Moving back to my chair before the fire I sat down, lit another cigarette and tried to assemble my thoughts into some sort of coherent order before my visitors should arrive. Things had happened so rapidly during the last hour that a breathing space, however short, was only too welcome. I stared thoughtfully through the smoke of my cigarette at the glowing coals, while in my mind queries jostled each other in confused discordance. What connection lay between the girl who had so mysteriously entered my life and that little man to whom death had come with such tragic brutality? What connection, indeed, lay between that man and myself? What was the message he had been so eager to impart, a message which must surely have been of paramount importance for him to dare even death itself in order to deliver it? My head ached with the continuous repetition of these queries and my own ineffectual attempts to answer them, and it was with a distinct sensation of relief that at last I heard the front door-bell ring sharply and realized that my brief solitude was over.

A second later and Inspector McClure was shown into the room. I rose hastily to my feet and advanced to meet him. We shook hands, and at once the strength of his grip impressed me agreeably. He was a short, stockily built little man with a fine head and a manner which was commandingly decisive: a man fully convinced of his own importance in the scheme of things, yet one whose handling of responsibility eminently fitted him for a position of authority. He belonged to a type of grave, dour Scotsman whom I understand and admire wholeheartedly, and as I greeted him my words, although conventional, were entirely sincere.

"Good evening, Inspector McClure," I said, "I am very glad to meet you."

"Good evening, Captain Graeme. It was nice of you to spare me the time."

As he spoke he eyed me gravely, and with an inward smile of amusement I realized that my character was being weighed in the balance very cautiously, and that nothing I might say would have any power to move him once the verdict was given against me. Under the mask of light conversation while I proffered cigarette, drink and a chair, I watched him whimsically while he summed up his impressions, and it was with a feeling almost of relief that at last I saw a smile come to his eyes and lighten the severity of his features.

"Thank you," he said, sinking into that chair before the fire in which, not so very long before, another far more graceful form had been seated. He accepted the cigarette but, true to type, steadfastly refused the drink. " No, thank you, Captain Graeme," he insisted. " I never drink when on duty."

I sat down opposite him.

" I want you to tell me everything you know, Captain Graeme, about the man you say was arrested in your garage last night."

" You're quite certain my description tallied exactly with that of the body you found? " I asked.

" Quite . . . quite," he said decisively, " there can be no possible mistake. The body we found was that of a man, short and thick-set, with most unusually broad shoulders for his size. He is obviously a foreigner—a South American, I should say—and a complete stranger in these parts."

I stared at him engrossed.

" How was he murdered? " I asked.

" Strangled," said the Inspector gravely. " Something had been tied tightly around his neck until he was dead . . . and then removed. So far we haven't got a clue."

He paused a moment and then turned and looked me full in the face.

" And that is what I am hoping you will be able to supply me with, Captain Graeme. Please tell me everything you know."

I hesitated and then glanced at my watch. Mr. Malcolm should arrive at any moment now: far better to wait until he came and so avoid a double repetition of my tale.

"Perhaps we'd better wait until Mr. Malcolm arrives," I said. "He promised to come round at once."

"Oh, indeed!" A subtle change in the tone of his voice made me glance at the Inspector in surprise, and I saw that my mention of Mr. Malcolm had strangely, and by no means pleasantly, affected him. There was hostility in his glance and in the sudden stiffness of his manner. "And what has Mr. Malcolm got to do with this affair, Captain Graeme? I hardly think it is any of his business."

"But of course it is," I answered quickly, without noticing that he had recognized the name, but before I could say more the front door-bell rang again and a few seconds later the cause of the Inspector's surprising disturbance entered the room.

For a moment Mr. Malcolm was silent, staring at us both in turn, and at once I sensed that in that moment he had caught a quick appreciation of the situation between us, of my own momentary confusion and of the Inspector's veiled hostility. Nothing of this was apparent, however, in the cool urbanity of his greeting as, advancing into the room, he nodded to me smilingly and shook the Inspector warmly by the hand.

"Good evening, Inspector McClure," he said, "this is an unexpected pleasure. I didn't count upon meeting you here."

The other regarded him coldly.

"Good evening," he said shortly, "and I didn't expect to meet you, Mr. Malcolm . . . in fact, I really don't know why . . ."

I broke in boldly.

"I asked Mr. Malcolm to come in order to discuss the murder," I said firmly. "He . . ."

But like a discarded garment the urbanity had slipped away instantaneously from the face of Mr. Malcolm. He turned to me sharply.

"Murder?" he interrupted at once. "What murder?"

"The man in my garage last night," I said quickly, forgetting for the moment that as yet he knew nothing of my strange nocturnal visitant.

He looked at me perplexed.

"In your garage?" he said, and then at once he swung round on his heel and stared intently at the listening Inspector.

"What is all this about, Inspector?" he asked, and there was a hint of command in his voice to which the other did not fail to respond.

"A man was found murdered . . . strangled . . . in a wood off the Inverness road," he said abruptly, grudgingly almost.

"And when was this body discovered?" asked Mr. Malcolm curtly.

"This morning . . . about eleven o'clock," came the short response.

"This morning. . . ." Mr. Malcolm looked closely at the Inspector and his eyes narrowed thoughtfully.

"Indeed . . . and why, Inspector McClure, was I not advised of this fact?"

Upon Mr. Malcolm's entrance both the Inspector and myself had risen to our feet, and the two men were now standing a few paces from each other, the Inspector with arms folded firmly across his chest, swaying slightly on his feet, poised as though eager for the fray: Mr. Malcolm towering over him, his face expressionless, his eyes intent. At Mr. Malcolm's question a slow flush crept to the Inspector's cheek, but his voice was quite even and at ease when he replied.

"Because, Mr. Malcolm, I really don't see that it was . . . or *is* . . . any of your business. Of course I know that you work in close touch with our London colleagues . . ."

A smile, instantly suppressed, crept involuntarily to Mr. Malcolm's lips at so condescending an allusion to the dignitaries of Scotland Yard.

". . . but although I knew of your presence here, I understood you were merely acting more or less as a bodyguard to Captain Graeme."

Startled, I broke in abruptly.

"Good Lord!" I said, aghast. "Does everybody know about me?"

The Inspector smiled, and with his smile the hostility in his manner lessened.

"You are a very important person, Captain Graeme," he said slowly, and then, perhaps fearing lest he had flattered me unduly, he amended the statement quickly, ". . . at least, for the moment. Only a few of us know about you, however, and about Mr. Malcolm. But I really don't see that this murder has got anything to do with either of you."

"Oh, hasn't it?" I cried sharply. "It's got the hell of a lot to do with me, anyway . . . and, therefore, with Mr. Malcolm."

I turned to him as I spoke, and saw that he was watching me intently. He smiled as he caught my eye.

"Hadn't you better tell us all about it, Captain Graeme?" he said. "You made some remark just now about the man having been in your garage."

I nodded.

"He was," I said, "the same man . . . trying to give me some message, poor devil. But it's a long story . . . hadn't we better sit down?"

I looked at the Inspector eagerly. Without a word, but with a slight shrug of his shoulders, he sank back in his chair once more, and with the action I breathed a sigh of relief, for I knew he had now decided to accept Mr. Malcolm's unwelcome company at this interview. When we were all seated and I had handed Mr. Malcolm cigarettes and a drink, I was silent a moment, co-ordinating my thoughts, trying to decide upon what I should tell and what I should leave unsaid, for in some extraordinary way I had a strange aversion towards mentioning to the Inspector the fact of that fleeting glimpse I had caught of the girl in the mirror upon the wall. At last I made up my mind to reserve that part of my story until Mr. Malcolm and I were alone, and then I started quickly.

"Late last night, just before going to bed, I remembered a book I had left in my car in the garage. I decided to go and fetch it, and my uncle said he would accompany me. As he unlocked the door, and just as I was about to switch on the light, I saw that the folding doors on the other side of the garage—the doors leading to the road—were gradually opening. There was something sinister about it all, and . . . well, quite frankly, I can't understand it myself now, but I felt absolutely unable to switch on the light . . . a sort of mental paralysis, I suppose. Then suddenly I saw the outline of a very small, very broad man standing in the doorway staring straight at me—or so it seemed. He came up to me and said, very softly: '*The police know . . . I thought it was our secret. I can't imagine how they can possibly know . . . but they're going to get me. I want . . .*' But just then two figures in police uniforms came into the garage and seized him by the arms. He struggled violently, but it was all over in a moment. . . . I heard the click of handcuffs being adjusted, and then a voice said: 'What about some light?' I pressed the switch, and one of the policemen turned to me and told me they had been after him for some time, and suggested it must have been my car that he was after. They then said they'd come along to-day and give me a few particulars . . . then they went."

" And do you mean to say," burst in the Inspector violently, " that you let them go like that? Without moving a finger to help him, you let him be carried off to his death? "

I stared at the Inspector unhappily. On the face of it my conduct did seem lax to the point of guilt, but the cool tones of Mr. Malcolm's voice were quick to reassure me.

" Aren't you forgetting, Inspector McClure," he said quietly, " that the men were in police uniforms? Evidently Captain Graeme believed them to be your men."

The Inspector nodded quickly.

" Of course," he said, " I had forgotten that. You must pardon me, Captain Graeme."

I smiled. In spite of his bluntness—or, perhaps, because of it—I found the Inspector a man much to my liking.

" So you see, Inspector," I said, " in some mysterious way this murder is undoubtedly mixed up with my own affairs. Isn't it a case where . . . where Mr. Malcolm takes charge? "

He was silent for a moment: the thought, I could see, was far from palatable, but at last, and with an obvious effort, he nodded his head.

" I'm afraid so," he said slowly. " Yes, I'm afraid Mr. Malcolm takes charge."

Something in the drollness of the phrase made Mr. Malcolm laugh.

"It's all right, Inspector," he said. "I shan't be too domineering . . . in fact, I think we're going to get on excellently well."

An unwilling smile crept to the other's face, and he nodded his head in assent. I noticed that despite the dourness of his manner all real hostility had now completely disappeared, and I could not but admire the adroit way in which Mr. Malcolm had effected this miracle. To be born with the gift of music and the power to play upon diverse instruments is a great thing: to be born with the knowledge of men's hearts and the power to play upon them another and far greater thing, a talent beyond all price, and in that moment I realized that Mr. Malcolm was a man in possession of it.

The Inspector made a sudden movement as though to rise.

"I think I had better return to the station now and try to find out a little about these . . . policemen," he said briskly. "That is, of course," he smiled, "with your approval, Mr. Malcolm."

Mr. Malcolm laughed.

"Certainly," he said, "there is little else to discuss. I will come along myself later on this evening to know if there have been any further developments. You can then give me the full details."

They both rose to their feet, but something held me firm to my chair. I felt vaguely guilty, felt that I had been far from frank. Now that Mr. Malcolm was in charge of the case there seemed no purpose in my hiding all mention of the girl whose part in this grim affair I was so far from understanding.

"Wait," I said abruptly, "there's a lot more I haven't told you. You'd better sit down again, I think."

Both men turned and stared at me in surprise: both sank back silently into their chairs again, their eyes fixed upon me in eager attention.

"There was a girl in the garage," I said slowly. "I caught sight of her through the mirror on the wall."

"A girl? Why on earth didn't you mention her before?" cried the Inspector indignantly.

"Was she very good-looking, Captain Graeme?" asked Mr. Malcolm with a smile.

I looked at him in astonishment.

"Why should you suppose . . . ?"

He interrupted me suavely.

"A man will only trouble to shield youth and beauty, Captain Graeme," he said dryly. "Had she been old and plain you would have told us about her at once."

I laughed; the truth of his statement was irrefutable: and then, concealing nothing, I told them all that had happened in connection with the girl: of how I had locked her in the garage: of our conversation together: of the lift I had given her that night towards the nearest town—and I noticed when I came to this part that the

Inspector's face was a frowning disapproval, while in the eyes of Mr. Malcolm there was a glint of something midway between sympathy and humour.

I told of my last interview with the girl, of her strange visit here but a little while before, of the stranger purpose for that visit (and here I produced the tickets): of her mysterious allusion to the non-arrival of those policemen, an allusion which had sent me speeding to the telephone with a dawning of suspicion.

As I reached this point, the Inspector could contain himself no longer. He rose hastily to his feet and moved a few paces towards the door. He turned on me testily.

"How long ago since she went?" he cried excitedly.

I thought for a moment.

"Just about a quarter of an hour before you came," I said.

He glanced at his watch and frowned.

"My God! What a lot of time we've wasted," he said irritably. "If only you'd spoken before!"

Mr. Malcolm smiled up at him blandly.

"On the contrary, Inspector," he said, "we are most certainly not wasting time. We are, in fact, creating a delightful feeling of false security . . . and nothing in life is one half so dangerous as that."

I stared at them both resentfully. The Inspector, I could see, had already formed his own opinion—and that, to me, a most distasteful one—as to the girl's strange actions. This was but natural, of course. Mr. Malcolm's attitude, however, filled me with irritation, for to him also I felt that the girl was more than suspect.

" Aren't you forgetting one thing," I said indignantly, " that if it hadn't been for the girl herself we shouldn't be discussing her at this moment? It was only because I rang up the police-station that I heard about the murder . . . and it was she who suggested that . . . that there was something odd about the whole affair."

Mr. Malcolm looked at me thoughtfully: a puzzled frown shadowed his face for a moment, and when he spoke his voice was grave and deliberate.

" It is all very strange," he said slowly, " very strange indeed. I think, Captain Graeme, you should cultivate the acquaintance of this young lady. Will that be very difficult? "

I could not prevent a smile from creeping to my face.

" From personal inclination—definitely no," I admitted frankly. " Only . . . well, I'm afraid she's a very elusive creature, you know. I really don't know quite how to start."

Mr. Malcolm looked up at me in surprise.

" But that is obvious," he said, " you and your friend, Valais, will attend that great meeting of Brazilians on Thursday next to be held at the Florian Hall in London."

I drew a deep breath, and for a long time there was silence while gradually the full significance of his words sank deep within my brain. And in that moment I knew that my last hope of peace was gone: Mr. Malcolm had once again declared war on my behalf against Don Jose Alvares.

SEVEN

THE gay strains of a tango, played with the haunting depths of passion of which a Spanish orchestra alone is capable, drifted clearly to the ears of Tony Valais and myself as we clambered quickly from my car and moved along the narrow strip of red which carpeted the entrance to the Florian Hall. It was Thursday evening, the night of the reception to the Brazilian, and both of us, on tiptoe for adventure, were in that mood of reckless irresponsibility which survives but rarely the years of early youth. The Gallic temperament of Valais had made him greet the idea of being present at this function with an eagerness inspired, I felt sure, mainly by the spark of danger that it held. He had brushed aside all my demurs and hesitancies with a masterly hand, until by now I found myself equally as keen to renew acquaintance with Don Jose as before I had been anxious that we should part.

I followed Tony up the few steps leading to the entrance, and my heart beat fast with excitement, an excitement which, I must confess, was more than a little evoked by wonder whether among the ladies gathered to honour him would be she whose face was seldom absent from my thoughts. I handed the two strips of yellow card to an official at the door, while my eyes were already intent upon a small group of people who stood gathered around. But they were all strangers to me, and even as I noted the richly coloured uniforms of the men, brilliant with orders, Tony motioned me to follow him in the wake of another official, and we were led across a thickly carpeted lounge, dotted with giant palms, to a room wherein we deposited our hats and coats. Then, with pulses beating high, we returned once more to the lounge and followed the strains of music to a large hall, into which was gathering a vast concourse of people.

For a few moments Tony and I stood stock-still just outside the doors, on either side of which red-coated flunkeys were posted. The scene was magnificent, and both of us, although expecting much, found that reality had in this instance dumbfounded expectation. The hall was circular in shape: the great ceiling arched into a dome patterned with multitudinous slabs of coloured glass, which caused the light from half a dozen priceless candelabras to slant downwards into the room in a diversity of rainbow hues. A gallery ran around the hall, in the centre of which, immediately facing the door, the orchestra was placed. Little tables, gay with flowers, were set the length of this gallery, and already many people were seated at them. Below in the hall itself the crowd was thick, and through the strains of the band I could catch snatches of rapid speech in many tongues from the chattering groups as they moved to and fro, greeting one another with an obvious familiarity which I found surprising. So many of the guests seemed to be well acquainted with so many others, and as the hall held many hundreds the fact was unusual. Most of the men were foreigners: there were a few French, a scattering of British, but by far the greater portion were of that distinctive colour and elegance which denotes the Brazilian. The women, although far outnumbered by the men, seemed by the beauty of their faces, the richness of their gowns, to make up in a proud distinction for this lack of numbers. Dark-skinned, black-haired Brazilians, dainty, *soigne* Parisiennes, a few fair-complexioned English . . . all were elegant, all favoured with exceptional charm, and my heart beat quickly as I glanced from face to face, eager for the one I sought. But she was nowhere to be seen.

" My God! " said Tony in my ear, " what a scrum. Don Jose was certainly right . . . money does seem to have bought him quite a lot. Come on . . . let's make our bows to him."

He stepped towards the doors, and at once the flunkeys stood aside. A master of ceremonies inquired our names and announced us in stentorian tones. In a daze I followed Valais into the hall, and my heart beat fast again, for immediately to the right of us, surrounded by an admiring group of people, I saw the distinguished figure of our erstwhile host. He was smiling around at his friends, a smile which, to me, seemed tinged with cynicism, and I wondered if in acknowledging their tributes he was making some inward calculation as to the price which he had paid for them. As we neared him I could not but marvel at the magnificent poise of the man, for even as his eyes caught sight of us no slightest quiver of his features, no slackening in the fluency of his words, betrayed that our presence there differed in any way from that of the others. He checked his speech as Tony stood before him, and with a murmured word of apology to the people around, turned from them to greet us. He shook us both warmly by the hand.

"Good evening, Mr. Valais. Good evening, Captain Graeme. How very nice of you to come."

Not by a flicker of an eyelash, not by a tremor in his voice did he give us any hint whether our presence there was entirely unexpected or whether (which I felt bound to believe) the tickets had been sent by him.

"Good evening, Don Jose," said Tony, smiling. "You were expecting us, of course?"

The Brazilian smiled back at him blandly.

"A wise man never expects, Mr. Valais . . . he only hopes."

He turned from Tony and his eyes beamed at me genially. Memory of a nursery rhyme flitted involuntarily to my mind, and it occurred to me that even so might the spider have smiled as it welcomed the fly to its den.

" But," he went on suavely, " I would like to assure you that now you are both here, nothing at all is wanting to my happiness this evening."

The words were spoken without any trace of special significance, but my heart contracted in a sudden alarm. Again he seemed too grimly to resemble that exultant spider. Had we perhaps been a little over rash, over venturesome in walking thus boldly into his dangerous parlour? I glanced swiftly at Valais, and knew that my forebodings were but too well founded, for the Frenchman was smiling in that curiously quiet way which he affected when danger promised.

I could not refrain from a sudden hysterical laugh.

" I am afraid, Don Jose," I said recklessly, " we have done little to deserve such flattery."

He turned to me thoughtfully, and for a moment his eyes stared intently into mine; then with a careless shrug of his shoulders he answered me:

" I can promise you, Captain Graeme, that my words contain no flattery."

Again superficially the words were courteous enough, but beneath their surface meaning I sensed a steely suggestion of menace which chilled me inwardly. For a long moment our glances held, and then, with a gesture of apology, Don Alvares turned back to the group of people from whom our coming had temporarily parted him.

" You will pardon me now, gentlemen," he said quietly, " but unhappily my time is not my own. I hope, however, to have the pleasure of a long talk with both of you a little later on."

He gave a short, foreign bow and then moved away, and in a moment the admiring group had centred him once more.

With one accord Tony Valais and I hastened across the hall and ascended with quick steps the few stairs leading to the gallery above. Here the crowd, although perhaps not so dense as that in the hall below, was yet sufficiently thick to make it impossible for us to discover a quiet place apart. There was much that I longed to speak about, but in this motley throng such speech might prove too perilous. Coming to rest at last in an alcove where not more than a dozen people were gathered together, we leaned our elbows upon the narrow edge of the balustrade and stared down at the surging mass beneath. Eagerly I scanned the faces of the women . . . but without success: the one I sought was not amongst them. A feeling of melancholy gripped my mind: I had been so certain that she would be here, but apparently my luck had failed me.

" Worried? "

I looked at Tony and saw that he was watching me, an amused expression on his face.

" Well, not exactly," I replied, " but it is all very disturbing, you know. Think of all the information that we have gathered about this man, think of his true character. Damn it, Tony, he's responsible for murder —after all, even if he didn't actually kill with his own hands, his money did—and here he is being fêted apparently by all the best people in London."

"That's not worrying you," said Tony with a smile.

I looked at him in astonishment.

"Of course it is."

"Bilge! You're wondering where she is."

I blushed. I could not help it: the perspicacity of my friend always took me by surprise, and I think he drew a mischievous pleasure out of my proneness to this embarrassingly childish habit out of which I have never completely grown.

He laughed.

"All the same, Alec, old friend, there is perhaps just a background of truth in what you have just said. It's a most amazing thing, and a pretty good advertisement for the man's own creed, that all these gilded fellows should be here paying their respects not to the man, whom they probably don't even know, but to his money and to the power which that money gives him. What are they all? Sycophants, obviously. And how does he consider them? Merely as counters, old boy, merely as counters." He paused. "Men for counters," he added thoughtfully.

Suddenly his mood changed. He looked up at me.

" Well, pretty useful counters, too, at times. But what are *we* doing here? "

" Presumably," I said quietly, " looking for the girl."

" We don't seem to be doing very much in that line," answered Tony.

" We can't do very much," I replied, " except to look around this room and chance seeing her, and this is a fairly good position to do it from."

" What are we going to do when we find her? "

I paused for a moment, and then I laughed.

" I don't know," I said. " What *are* we going to do? "

" Well," said Tony, " as I understand it, all we've got to do is to discover the connection which lies between that young woman's knowledge of the murder of that poor devil up in Scotland and the murder itself."

I did not reply. There must be some connection, I knew, but I hated to think along those lines. For a few moments we remained in silence, both looking about us and scrutinizing the faces of the women there in an endeavour to pick out from among them the dark, *svelte* beauty of the girl whom we had come to find and to talk with. But our efforts were unavailing. If she were in that room she was taking great care that we should not see her. I turned my eyes towards those a little nearer to us, those occupying the tables at each side and standing clustered around. It had occurred to me that sometimes when looking for a needle in a haystack one is apt to omit that space immediately between one's feet, and so I tried a little closer. But still I could see no sign of her, no sign of this lady who had appeared to be laughing mockingly at us—or was it at Alvares?—on each occasion when I had come in contact with her. For a moment I wondered whether perhaps she did not owe a great deal of her attraction to the mystery of her rare appearances. She was nowhere to be seen, and I began to think that, even though she might be there, it must be her pleasure to remain concealed from us. This was more than probable, for she must have realized that the information she had given me on the night following the murder, which had made me ring up the police, must in some way connect her with it.

A sudden pressure of the crowd around us towards the balustrade from which we were overlooking the scene in the hall below, made me turn round again. It was obvious from the interested glances of those who were pressing near us that something of unusual importance was happening below, and I glanced down again at the crowded floor. A man, particularly embellished with decorations, had made his appearance, and was even now greeting Don Jose Alvares. I recognized him immediately from photographs which I had seen. Here was a great Brazilian personage, and I marvelled at the spectacle before me. The crowd of well-dressed men and women pressed forward eagerly around me . . . and yet, what exactly were they looking at? Entirely unsuspected, I was ready to concede, by the South American gentleman who was shaking him by the hand, Don Jose Alvares, a criminal if ever there was one, both in thought and deed, was now being treated by him as an equal. The sight disgusted me, and I turned my eyes away. They wandered aimlessly towards the door . . . and there, standing close by it, and just near one of those flunkeys in scarlet, was the girl.

I will hotly deny that I was in love with her at that time. How could I have been in love with a woman whom I knew to be intimately concerned in the affairs of a man like Jose Alvares: a man whom I had proved to my own satisfaction—although unable to broadcast it to the world—to be a murderer? How could I have been in love with a woman whom I knew to be acquainted with the hidden details of a killing carried out in my own country, a few miles from my home?

Until she was cleared of any complicity in that crime I could feel nothing but doubt concerning her. But yet her attraction as she stood there, her eyes fixed on the eminent Brazilian and the man whom he had come to honour, frankly amazed me. She was dressed in some soft, clinging material the colour of dark poppies, which set off the dark sheen of her hair, the creamy texture of her skin as no other colour could ever have done. The beauty of her eyes, even from where I stood, was a thing to marvel at, and for many moments I watched her breathlessly, my mind filled with admiration.

Then suddenly she looked away from the two men who were deep in conversation, and straight up at the gallery towards the very place where we were standing. I do not think I am wrong in stating that she caught sight of me, for over her face there came that half-mocking smile which was so tantalizing, meaning so much and yet revealing nothing.

But even as she smiled my attention was distracted by a man who had approached near to me without my noticing. He was a rude little fellow. I looked at him and remarked that his evening clothes fitted him none too well. I was astonished that to such a gathering of beautiful women and well-dressed men this individual should have gained admittance, yet there he was jostling me in an ill-mannered attempt to reach the railing of the gallery and improve his own view of the spectacle below. I must admit that for a second the desire came to me to block his way, but at once I realized that such an action would be foolish. After all, if the little man had no manners, if he wanted to see better than others and was prepared to go to such lengths to obtain a view, he was of the type likely to make a fuss should I resist him. I had no desire for any fuss, and I moved a little closer to Tony Valais and surrendered the space which obviously the man was only too willing to take even at my expense.

"Who are you a-shoving of?" asked Tony.

"Merely passing it on," I replied, and nodded towards the little fellow.

Tony gave him one look, smiled to me and resumed his examination of the room.

"Have you seen her?" I asked.

"No," said Tony. "The sight for which my eyes crave has so far been denied to me."

"But not to me," I said quietly.

Tony looked at me sharply.

"Oh! Where?"

"Yonder . . . by the door."

He turned in the direction which I indicated, and he saw her.

"I think," he said quietly, "that we had better execute a flanking movement. We don't want to let her escape us now, Alec. The matter is of definite importance."

"What are we going to do when we do talk to her?" I asked.

"You," said Tony in a very quiet voice, which was audible only to me in spite of the close proximity of those gathered around us, "are going to ask her quite straightforwardly exactly why she said what she did say to you in Scotland."

"And if she refuses to answer me?"

"Then I will step in," said Tony, "and I will tell her that she has got to answer us . . . that her silence leads us to suppose a certain complicity in the crime, and that she will not be allowed to leave the hall a free woman unless she gives us a reasonable explanation."

I looked at him.

"I don't like it, Tony," I said quietly.

"Of course you don't," he said with a smile. "Neither do I. It's always unpleasant to threaten a lady, and far more so when she is as beautiful as this one . . . but still, we've got no choice."

It was true: we had no choice. I turned in order to get through the crowd and descend into the hall below to the door where she was standing, but even as I turned I realized that I would have to push my way through the people behind, craning forward eagerly to catch a glimpse of the throng beneath.

I had scarcely started to make a way for myself when suddenly from close beside us there came the report of a pistol-shot.

A moment before the entire concourse of people, a large one, had been gossiping gaily, chatting loudly to each other, the band all the time playing an exotic South American accompaniment to the conversation. But the effect of that pistol-shot was staggering. As if called to a halt by the conductor, the band ceased playing almost simultaneously: shocked out of their careless enjoyment, all those who were there stopped talking instantly and looked around with startled expectancy. There was a complete silence in the Florian Hall . . . but only for a few seconds. Somewhere from the crowd immediately surrounding Don

Jose Alvares a woman screamed . . . and with that scream pandemonium broke loose.

There is nothing so catching as panic, and although no further shot came to shatter the nerves of the various nationalities gathered in that room, yet that one scream had been enough. A woman, obviously she who had been responsible for it, swooned to the floor, and at once one or two of the men nearest to her moved quickly forward to her assistance. Immediately the crowd, some of whom were shouting in excitement, swirled forwards to the very spot where the girl had collapsed. They were evidently under the impression, as indeed were most of us within that room, that it was she who had received the assassin's bullet. But as suddenly as she had swooned so did she recover, and a man took it upon himself to raise his arms above his head and shout for silence. With an obvious pleasure at finding himself the centre of interest, he announced solemnly that the girl was unhurt and that the bullet had not struck her: whereupon, for some reason best known to themselves, those around began to applaud him vigorously.

But others in that room had been more business-like.

I turned in order to get out quickly, in the first place because I dislike scenes, and secondly because it had occurred to me that the lady whom we desired to interview might very well take fright at this disturbance and disappear. Evidently the same thought had come to Tony Valais, for he also turned to follow me, but a cordon had been formed around the half-dozen of us in that corner of the gallery, a cordon of angry-faced men under the command of one who obviously had control and authority, and who I felt was most probably an officer in the Secret Service of Brazil.

"Not one of you will move," he said firmly, "until you have first been searched."

I realized at once the utter hopelessness of disputing this order, even as I admitted to myself the justice of it, for the shot had undoubtedly come from near where I was standing. There was nothing at all to be done, much as I regretted it, and I cast a quick glance towards the door, beside which the scarlet-coated flunkey was still standing as though stricken dumb by that startling shot, to see whether the girl was still there. But I was not surprised that she had gone, and my heart sank within me. I told myself that she might not yet have left the building, that perhaps she had no intention of doing so but was even now somewhere within that throng surrounding Don Jose; a crowd which out of the corner of my eye I could see fighting to shake him by the hand. For a moment I could not understand this attitude, and then in a flash I realized that the shot must have been intended for him, and that everyone was now congratulating him upon his escape. But I had no time for thought, for if the girl was going to escape us she could easily do so in the space it would take these men to prove for themselves that Tony and I, at least, had not been concerned with the attempted assassination.

Whilst I was thus summing up the position, six of us who had been standing by the railings had been separated from the rest, and it was curious and interesting to notice the look of shocked disapproval with which the others who crowded round regarded us. The leader of those who had surrounded us was obviously an officer of high rank in his own country, for he was dressed in perfectly cut evening clothes and bore the unmistakable distinction of effortless good breeding.

The first man was examined quickly, and when he had given his name, allowed to mingle with the others. I was the next and the same routine was followed. I moved to one side and waited for Tony, whose turn it then was, for the extra few seconds would make no difference to the girl's escape and I wanted him with me.

But as soon as the Brazilian official had laid hands upon him I realized at once from the expression on his face that something had occurred. He had run his fingers loosely over Tony's pockets, and suddenly slipping his right hand into the tail-coat pocket of Tony's evening-dress, he withdrew a miniature revolver. He snapped it open, and in full view of all of us five live cartridges fell into his hand . . . and one used shell. A gleam of triumph darted to the Brazilian's eyes. He stood there before Tony, who was leaning back against the railings, an expression of blank astonishment on his face: motionless he stood there and said no word, only the fire in his eyes revealing the fury that raged within him. With an obvious effort he controlled himself.

" You will come with me, sir," he said.

" That revolver," said Tony, very quietly but very distinctly, " is not mine. I've never seen it before. It has been planted on me."

I moved a step forward, anxious to corroborate my friend, but even as I did so I stopped, for I realized that there was nothing I could say that could help him. I did not know whether or not he had come into the hall with a revolver in his pocket: I did not know anything except the certainty that the attempted assassination could never have been tried by Valais. Then suddenly I remembered that I had been standing next to Tony, and that had he fired that shot I must have seen some movement on his part, and again I was just about to say so when Tony looked at me. Softly he murmured two words, and even as he did so his eyes glanced towards the hall below and then back towards the Brazilian who was still standing before him with that damning piece of evidence in his hand. The two words that Tony had spoken formed a name. " Green Devils," he had said, and my mind, perhaps rendered more acute than usual because of the very real danger in which he was, worked rapidly. I had arrived from Scotland the night before and had gone to a music-hall with Tony, having first met him for the evening meal. There had been one turn in the programme which had enthralled both of us. I do not know the correct description for such a turn, but it had been composed of the most amazing acrobatics—almost aerobatics—carried out to very slow music. A girl had been hurled from one side of the stage to the other, from partner to partner, in a manner which had led both of us to the conviction that she could have kept no solid bones at all. Right across the stage she had been thrown, to be caught deftly by one of her partners at the other side. The quick glance that had accompanied Tony's two words had given me a clue to his idea. I did not stop to think: had I done so, I realize now that I would only have refused to enter into such a mad scheme, and instead would have attempted to clear him on the spot. But evidently Tony's mind held no desire to escape from what was confronting him at the moment, nor any thought of what might happen to him either in that hall or later in a court of law; all that was concerning him was the fear lest we might, because of this happening, entirely lose the girl for whom we had been looking, perhaps, indeed, lose all sight of her for ever. His idea was mad, but many of Tony's ideas were only successful because they were mad.

Eagerly elbowing a passage through the crowd, who readily made way for me in the hope of themselves obtaining a better view, I ran round the gallery and down the stairs to the floor directly beneath the spot where Tony was standing. It was not a very big drop from the gallery, which was built so low that I could practically reach up to it with my outstretched hand. However, it was not a jump which any man could have taken without the chance of at least twisting an ankle pretty badly. We were fairly near the door, and I realized that if Tony jumped as he evidently intended doing, and I succeeded in catching him, we should probably be able to make a quick escape before being interfered with, the very audacity of the plan itself proving a valuable asset.

Even as I reached the spot immediately below Tony he suddenly threw himself backwards over the low railing. It was a very brave act and staggered me at the time. I could well understand it had he turned and jumped, but to throw himself backwards as soon as he saw, out of the corner of his eye, that I was ready, was a thing which only a man with boundless recklessness and courage would ever have considered doing. I suppose he did not turn and jump because he realized that had he done so his intention must have become obvious long before he could have carried it through, and he might have been prevented. There was, however, more skill in his action than I had given him credit for: he came down towards me parallel to the floor, and it was an easy matter for me to catch him in my arms. We both fell, but very gently, for I had broken his fall and had done myself no harm. We scrambled to our feet, and even before the power of voice had come again to the startled onlookers, we had shot through the door between the open-mouthed flunkeys and out to the road. My car was by the kerb. In a moment I had jumped to the driving-seat and Tony had scrambled in beside me. By the grace of God the car started up straight away, and in a space of time which I should say could scarcely have been more than a minute from his actual jump, we were making for the outskirts of London.

The roads were deserted at that hour. My only fear was that the telephone wires might already be in operation, and that we would be stopped somewhere on the main road. But this did not happen. In a very short time we were travelling as fast as the car could go along the Great West Road and out towards the comparative safety of the country. We had spoken no word during this initial part of the journey, but now I looked at my friend.

" Where to? " I asked.

" I don't know," Tony laughed. " Where d'you suggest? "

" Let's avoid the towns," I said. " We could cut across by the river to Chertsey, miss Woking altogether and get down towards the coast. What about that?"

" No bad scheme. Drive anywhere you like for the moment, but if you know of a good pub go to it. There's no reason to be uncomfortable, and . . ."

He paused.

" And what? " I asked.

" I'm thirsty."

I nodded: so was I.

We both relapsed into silence and our own thoughts throughout the remainder of the journey. I had much to consider, much to get clear in my mind. The whole devilish cunning of that strange scene in the Florian Hall was beginning to reveal itself in a damning light, for the more I thought over the affair the more convinced I became that it all formed part of a skilfully laid scheme directed against the pair of us. Although only Tony had been directly concerned, I felt assured that my own complicity with him would have been at once insisted upon had the Brazilian's attempt met with success. I remembered that little man who had been so rough in his endeavours to secure a good view-point from the gallery, and the relation between his close proximity to us and the finding of the pistol in Tony's pocket became at every moment still more apparent. Beyond all doubt, Don Jose Alvares had arranged the whole affair: the little man was to take up a position near us and then to shoot at Alvares, but, naturally, the shot must go wide: a deft insertion of the pistol into the pocket of one of us, and then his swift departure. The scheme was an ingenious one, and I marvelled indeed at our incredible luck in thus frustrating it . . . but even as triumph welled up within me, remembrance of the girl and the fact that we had been unable to talk with her stemmed my elation. There, indeed, Don Jose's plan had ruined our own, and my thoughts were sombre as I realized that perhaps our last chance of seeing her was gone for ever.

Finally I drove up to a small inn at Mitchling, which lay within seven miles or so of the south coast. I pulled up, but one look at my friend made me realize that he was still deep in thought, and that there was no point in disturbing him as yet. I got out and knocked up the innkeeper. I had been there many times before, and as soon as he recognized me he hastened to make us welcome. While rooms were being prepared, I put the car away and then joined Tony, who, still immersed in his thoughts, was seated by the fire in the sitting-room, which our host had quickly lighted. He was consuming a tankard of beer, and another tankard was waiting for me: I gratefully emptied it.

" What about Mr. Malcolm? " I said to Tony suddenly. " Hadn't we better ring him up? "

" I've tried to three times," said Tony, " but he's not at home. He's not at his club, either. I think we will have to wait until the morning."

For a long time we sat over the fire discussing the extraordinary happening that evening in the Florian Hall, reviewing the affair from every angle, trying to discover by whom and for what purpose the gun had been so skilfully planted in Tony's pocket. I do not know how much later it was when at last Tony turned to me and yawned.

" What about a spot of sleep, old son? " he said.

I looked at him. He was smiling gently at me with that smile I knew so well, that smile which gave me confidence.

"All right," I said; "frankly, I feel quite ready."

We rose to our feet and turned towards the door, and even as we did so I suddenly saw that this was opening. Something about it made me stop in my tracks and glance quickly towards Tony Valais, and I saw that his eyes were fixed on it also. But if the door had appeared to be opening in a furtive manner, now apparently whoever was actuating it had gained full confidence, for it opened with a sudden jerk.

A girl, very tall, very beautiful, with a tantalizing smile upon her lips, strode swiftly into the room and closed the door behind her.

She turned and looked at us, half-mocking, half-amused.

EIGHT

"Good evening," she said lightly, "or is it already good morning?"

Neither of us answered her: we were both far too astounded to remember our manners. I stared at her in silence, and for a few hectic moments I began to think I must be seeing all this in a dream, so amazingly did each incredible incident follow the other, so fantastic was her presence in that room.

Still smiling that elusive, enigmatic smile, she moved slowly across the floor towards a low arm-chair that stood beside the fire. Sinking gracefully into this, she slipped a black evening cloak a little off her shoulders so that I could see the dull gleam of the poppy-coloured silk and the chain of pearls that were clasped about her throat. Then she looked up at us both, and now her smile was wholly amused. We must, indeed, have presented a laughable spectacle, standing there literally with our mouths open, our eyes following her every movement with a rapt attention. But her next words stirred me into life.

"Thank you so much for the lift."

"The *what*?"

"The lift," she continued coolly. "You know: what you give if you're a nice man to a lady who would otherwise have to walk."

"You . . . you were in the car!" I gasped.

She nodded her head smilingly.

"At the back . . . under the canvas cover. That's why my hair is a little untidy. I'm afraid you drive a golf-ball better than a car, Captain Graeme . . really, the way you took those corners made me fear for my life."

She laughed, and then opening a handbag which she carried, she took out a comb and a powder-puff, and with complete composure proceeded to repair the ravages of the wind.

All this while Tony had been regarding her in silence, at first in complete astonishment, which gradually gave way to satisfaction. He moved over to her now and slipped into the chair opposite. I drew up a seat between them, my eyes ever intent upon this extraordinary woman whose sudden appearances were becoming almost a feature in my life.

"Good evening, Miss Lindsey," said Tony suddenly. "You must allow me to introduce myself since my friend still seems to be suffering from some form of mental coma. My name is Valais . . . Tony Valais. I admired you from a distance in Brazil."

She had now completed the unnecessary process of beautifying the already beautiful, and was looking at him smilingly.

" So you remember me," she said.

Tony leant forward impressively: like all Frenchmen, he was at his best when in the company of a lovely woman, and from my long knowledge of him I knew that a compliment was pending. I was not disappointed.

" Miss Lindsey," said Tony slowly, " when I saw you in Brazil I thought to myself that you were one of the most beautiful women I had ever seen in all my life."

The girl's smile broadened.

" And now? " she queried lightly.

" And now," went on Tony gravely, " I know I was mistaken."

The smile faded from her face, but Tony went on unconcerned:

" Not *one* of the most beautiful . . . *the* most beautiful."

Her eyes danced with pleasure and amusement.

" When I was a very little girl," she said, " I was always told to beware of a man who flattered. . . . I was told that all flatterers only do so with an object. What is yours, Mr. Valais? "

I had expected to hear Tony deny the imputation vigorously: I was, therefore, all the more astonished at his reply.

" Miss Lindsey," he said slowly, " you are not only very beautiful . . . but you are also very clever—a strange combination. Of course I've got an object.

In point of fact, I'm doing my level best to put you into a good humour before I ask you questions."

They both laughed; but I was still too stunned by the sudden entrance of the girl to take more than an onlooker's part in all that was going on.

"So you want to ask me questions, Mr. Valais?"

He nodded gravely.

"Lots of questions, Miss Lindsey . . . thirteen for twelve. Here's one to begin with . . . do you believe in miracles?"

She stared at him in amazement: obviously this was not of the kind she had expected.

"Miracles?" she said.

Tony nodded.

"You know: the sort of things that in violent cases have even been known to alter people's lives entirely . . . make them keep to the beaten track for a change . . . turn over new leaves and all the rest of it."

"No," she said lightly. "I'm afraid I don't. Do you?"

"I do," said Tony at once. "I most fervently do. As soon as you entered the room, Miss Lindsey, once I was sure my eyes were really seeing what I thought they saw, and that it wasn't the beer, I knew at once that a miracle had happened. All the way down here from town I'd been trying to fathom how to get in touch with you, and all the time you were within a few inches of me."

The smile lingered a moment yet upon the girl's face, but then it went entirely, and she regarded him curiously.

"Why were you so anxious to see me?" she asked.

Tony laughed.

"I might ask why *you* are so anxious to see *us*," he answered quickly, "so anxious that you chose our car to bring you here."

She nodded unsmilingly.

"You might," she said, "but my question came first, and I'd like it answered first."

Tony shrugged his shoulders resignedly.

"Ah, well, a woman must come first, of course. Now the most important question I want to ask you, Miss Lindsey, is this . . ." He paused a moment and then spoke with a certain dramatic emphasis which was somewhat unnerving: "What share had you in the murder of that little man in Scotland?"

She flushed with anger, and her eyes flashed with resentment.

"How dare you . . ." she began, but I interrupted her quickly.

My strange immobility had been banished by Tony's callous words, and my mind was a curious mixture of anger and pity . . . anger with Tony and pity for the girl. I turned on Tony furiously.

"Surely," I said hotly, "you could have been a little more . . ."

I paused for words, but Tony voiced my thought instantly.

"Tactful?" he suggested. "Surely it's a little late for tact now. After all, it's a murder I'm inquiring about."

I cast another look at the girl. Her colour was still high, but in her eyes there glowed almost a defensive light. Her head was tilted imperiously, as though scorning the company in which she found herself, and I felt that never before had she looked one half so lovely.

Something happened to me then which altered profoundly the whole pattern of my life, something which made me cast away my doubts instantaneously and become convinced that despite all appearances to the contrary, this girl was guiltless. For even as I looked at her I knew that I wanted her, that perhaps I really loved her.

I turned to Tony quickly, and I think there must perhaps have been a new note in my voice, for at my first words he looked sharply at me.

"Tony," I said, "we know it's murder, but there's another thing of which I am completely convinced. Miss Lindsey is as guiltless of it as we are ourselves."

The girl flashed me a look of gratitude, but there was a certain pathos in it, too, which stirred me deeply.

"That was nice of you, Captain Graeme," she said slowly, "and it also happens to be true. But I'm afraid your friend is not of the same opinion."

Tony looked at her irresolutely. He then glanced at me, and I saw that he was full of perplexity at my sudden championship of one about whom he knew I had, until but recently, also shared serious doubts. I returned his look gravely.

"I know she's had nothing to do with it, Tony," I said firmly. "Don't ask me why. I can't tell you . . . but I know it's true."

There was a pause, and I could see that Tony was impressed by the sincerity of my conviction. At last he shrugged his shoulders and turned to her once more.

"I am a Frenchman," he said quietly, "and, therefore, although it may seem strange to you, less liable to be carried away . . . because I am less chivalrous in the ridiculous sense. Your actions have been very suspicious, young lady."

She raised her eyebrows inquiringly.

"Indeed," she answered coldly. "In what way?"

Tony leant forward, and when he spoke his words were deliberate and slow.

"You knew about the murder before even the police did . . . you were following the men when my friend found you in his garage. Why? How can you explain these things, Miss Lindsey?"

She was thoughtful for a moment, and then, ignoring Tony altogether, she looked towards me.

"I could explain everything," she said in a low voice, "I will explain everything later . . . but not just for the moment. I could even tell you who it was who murdered the man . . . and why."

, My heart beat fast.

"Is that a promise, Miss Lindsey?" I asked. "Can I rely upon that?"

She nodded her head, and as though at the sudden coming of a thought, she smiled.

"Perhaps even sooner than you hope," she added quickly, and then, turning back to Tony, she stared at him calmly. "Well, Mr. Valais, and what is your verdict? Guilty or not guilty?"

For a long moment Tony returned her stare. Then he spoke quietly.

"Judgment reserved for lack of evidence." He paused, and then: "Tell me one thing, Miss Lindsey. What possible reason had this man for coming to Captain Graeme? What was the message he was so anxious to give him? If we could be clear on that it would help a lot."

She was thoughtful for a little while, and when she spoke her words were carefully chosen.

"Don Jose has a curious creed, Mr. Valais. He believes that money will buy everything. He is wrong . . . it won't buy friendship, although it may purchase a very fair imitation of the real thing. There are many people in Brazil who have good reason to dislike Don Jose. Might it not possibly have been one of these, or, perhaps, a messenger from them, who was anxious to obtain the help of Captain Graeme?"

At the last words she rose and took a few steps across the room.

"I wonder whether you would be kind enough to arrange with the innkeeper for me to have a room for the night," she said. "I am feeling very tired."

We had already risen from our chairs, and I moved to the door to summon the innkeeper, but Tony raised his hand to stop me.

"Just a moment, Alec," he said, and then, turning to the girl: "I answered your question, Miss Lindsey," he continued, "but you haven't yet answered mine."

She looked at him in surprise.

"I wanted to know why you were so anxious to see us that you chose our car to bring you along. Why are you here, Miss Lindsey? Surely not a very unnatural question to ask."

She smiled at him, that mocking, tantalizing smile I knew so well.

"Not at all unnatural, Mr. Valais, but you must please let me off telling you to-night. I am so terribly tired . . . and, after all, there is all to-morrow, isn't there?"

Tony looked at her doubtfully.

"You have no conception what pangs of curiosity I shall have to suffer until then. However . . . I suppose it must be as you wish."

She laughed.

" I'll pity you this far," she said lightly. " Mightn't I also have been anxious to escape from the Hall, and chosen your car because it was the safest? "

Tony looked at her thoughtfully.

" I see," he said. " Well, I'll now interview the innkeeper on your behalf and see what can be done . . . and I wish you wouldn't always start ' mightn't I '? "

He moved quickly to the door and closed it gently behind him.

The girl and I were alone.

For what seemed to last a considerable time, but was in reality, I do not doubt, but a matter of moments, we stared at each other. My sudden knowledge of my own feelings, the extraordinary realization that I was much more than normally attracted made me awkward and ill at ease. My attitude towards this girl had undergone such a violent upheaval that I was completely at a loss what to do and what to say. I felt I needed a breathing space in order to understand exactly the full nature of this thing that had befallen me. I stared at her gravely, marvelling again at the perfect beauty of her face.

My own uncertainty seemed in some curious way to have been a little imparted to her, for all trace of that mocking smile had completely vanished, and her eyes as they met mine were filled with a strange light which I had never seen in them before, and which I could not understand. There was a hint of pride in it, and a hint of something which was remarkably like pain.

Then suddenly, even as Tony's returning footsteps sounded in the passage outside, she spoke to me quickly.

"Come to my room to-night . . . in half an hour," she said. "I'll leave the door unlocked. I can speak to you then."

I have no clear vision as to what followed, save a vague remembrance of Tony's entrance and of bidding her good night. Her words had given me a shock. At one moment she had seemed to me so inaccessible, a being to be worshipped from afar . . . and the next she had invited me to a secret assignation in her room. My mind was dazed, but even in the first moment of stunned surprise I did not question the significance of such an invitation. Unconventional it most certainly was, yet its strangeness ended there; but in spite of this, something, perhaps my own feeling for the girl, made me very loth to obey her summons.

As in a dream I walked up the stairs, and with a murmured "Good night" to Tony, entered my own room. I moved blindly to the bed and sat down upon it, while my mind struggled to co-ordinate the turmoil of tumultuous thoughts that filled it with confusion. Why had she asked me? What was she about to tell me? Why all this secrecy? Why had she followed us? Why? . . . Why? . . . Why? . . . All my thoughts about her ended in questions.

Suddenly I heard a clock strike, and realized that only fifteen minutes had passed since I had entered the room. Still fifteen more to go before the half-hour was up. I decided at once to seek Tony's company.

Softly I left my room and walked along the passage. There was a light shining beneath a door immediately opposite my own, and my heart beat fast as I passed it on my way to Tony. I tapped on his door lightly and then walked in, to find Tony already in bed. His light was still on, however, and he smiled at me as I entered.

" I thought you'd be paying me a visit," he said. " That was why I left the door unlocked. Well . . . did she say anything to you when I left you alone? "

I looked at him in surprise.

" She did? " went on Tony cheerfully. " That's good. I thought she might. I could see she wasn't feeling very friendly towards me, that's why I went for the innkeeper, hoping you might fraternize. Well? "

And then, as I was still silent, he became impatient.

" What on earth's the matter with you, Alec? You look as though you'd had a stroke! "

That was, indeed, more or less what I had received, but at this moment I felt deeply disinclined to tell him anything about it. Instead I sat down on the bed and looked at him thoughtfully.

" Tony," I said, " she did say something. She asked me to come to her room to-night . . . in half an hour."

His head shot up from the pillows instantly.

" The devil she did! " he said, and there was a note of astonishment in his voice which I was grateful to hear. He also, obviously, did not consider such an invitation one she would lightly give.

But now a sly smile came to his face.

" And you said you would? " he asked.

I shook my head.

" I was too surprised to answer," I admitted.

" But you're going, of course? " said Tony quickly.

I nodded at once.

" Of course," I said. " She wants to talk to me. But . . . what an hour and place to choose! "

Tony smiled at me quizzically.

" An astounding young woman," he said. " When you come to think of it, Alec, it's just the time and place she would be likely to choose . . . downstairs in the sitting-room, with me for audience, would have been far too prosaic for her dramatic instincts."

I looked at him thoughtfully.

" I suppose you're right," I said. " I wish she hadn't, all the same."

His eyes opened wide and his smile broadened.

" Do I hear the spirits of your Scottish ancestors speaking in shocked consternation at the thought? "

I shook my head.

" Don't be a fool, Tony," I said. " It's not that I'm shocked at all . . . only . . . well . . ."

There was silence for a moment, and then Tony looked at me curiously.

" D'you know, Alec," he said at last, " I do believe you've fallen in love with this girl. What a ghastly calamity."

I looked up at him angrily.

" Calamity! " I said. " What on earth do you mean? "

Tony burst out laughing.

" A little trap, my friend," he said. " Had I merely asked if you were in love with her you would have denied it at once. . . . Alec, old son, I only regret I have no spirits here in which to toast you. Accept, at any rate, my hearty felicitations."

I frowned.

" Stop rotting, Tony," I said. " There's nothing funny about this at all. I . . . I don't know where I am or what to think."

His manner changed at once: he looked at me searchingly.

" Serious? " he said. " You can't possibly mean that, Alec. It's . . . why, it's preposterous. You hardly know anything about the girl . . . and what you do know is pretty crashing."

I nodded my head.

" All perfectly correct, Tony, yet in spite of that . . ."

I paused. " Well, let's talk of something else. Why on earth do you think she followed us? "

He shrugged his shoulders.

" Perhaps to escape, as she said. Anyway, you'll know all about that sooner than I shall. If I were you, old lad, I'd try to get everything out of her while her communicative mood is on. God knows it doesn't seem to be very frequent."

" I will."

I glanced at Tony's watch on the chair beside his bed: it was now on the stroke of the half-hour.

I rose quickly from the bed.

" I'll be off now," I said quietly. " Wish me luck."

" All the best," said Tony, smiling. " Give the lady my love . . . with your approval. Oh, and mind you come in and tell me all about it afterwards. I shan't be asleep."

" Right."

I walked quickly from the room, closed the door gently behind me, and moved along the passage towards that door opposite my own, under which I noticed that the light had now been extinguished.

Softly I tapped upon it. There came no answer. I waited a few seconds and then tapped again, but this time I did not wait for any answering summons. Quickly I opened the door, shut it behind me, and my hand groped for the electric light switch that, as in my own room, I supposed would lie to the right of the door.

I reached for it, and even as I actuated it I looked towards the centre of the room . . . and found myself staring straight into the barrel of a revolver held very firmly in the hand of an olive-skinned man in perfect evening dress.

I was in the presence of Don Jose Alvares.

NINE

For a few seconds there was complete silence and no movement in that room. I remained standing, paralysed with surprise, my finger still on the electric light switch, staring not at Don Jose Alvares but at the little circle of steel which unswervingly pointed directly at my heart. Then my eyes moved upwards towards the face of the man himself, and I noted that a half-smile of cynical amusement was playing about his cruel lips.

I do not know whether it was the effect of that smile, or whether it was merely an hysterical result of the tremendous shock which I had just undergone, but abruptly I felt utterly unable to prevent myself from doing something which I realized was entirely out-of-place. I struggled with myself for a moment or two, but I had to give in; I burst into a paroxysm of uncontrollable laughter. I simply could not stop. I leant against the door and laughed until the tears rolled down my cheeks and Don Alvares and his revolver, indeed the whole room, became blurred and indistinct. I had been completely fooled: that was obvious. The girl had enticed me to her room and placed me utterly in the power of this man who was evidently her master.

It had been cleverly done and I had been neatly trapped, but this in itself would not have made me laugh. No: what had finished me more than anything else was, I think, the colossal contrast from what I had expected. Actually, as I have tried to make clear, I had really very little idea what to expect, but I had obeyed the summons because it had so obviously been my duty to do so. The girl must have known this: she must have known that the bait was irresistible and have laughed to herself at the ease with which I had fallen. And with this thought all desire for laughter left me. I stopped as suddenly as I had begun, and now an entire revulsion of feeling came over me. I felt myself growing angry: to have been duped was bad enough, but to have been duped in this particular way was insufferable.

Into this whirl of thoughts came the voice of Don Jose, suave, cool, but, because of those very qualities, somewhat sinister, and at once I was brought back to acute realization of my unpleasant situation.

"Good evening, Captain Graeme. Not, I think, a very nice position in which to find himself for a man who bears a proud military title and an old Scottish name."

Quickly I collected my thoughts. If this interview were to start with a battle of wits I was at an immediate disadvantage, for I knew my adversary to be a formidable foe. I must take the greatest care not to reveal anything that might be important, and about which

Don Jose might be anxious to learn. I did not answer but just stared at him, trying to pierce through the half-smiling mask which so effectually concealed the thoughts in his mind.

" You have no answer? " said Don Alvares quietly. " I am not surprised: there could be no satisfactory explanation. I have always understood, Captain Graeme, that a young lady's room was sacred from trespass by a British gentleman."

The lash stung, but I steeled myself to ignore his insults, for no doubt he hoped by them to stir me into some rash reply, and I was determined, having been fooled so easily by the girl, not to be fooled again so soon by him.

The Brazilian paused for a moment and stared at me fixedly. I realized that the game we were playing had some relationship to poker, and that I must reveal nothing by any action or expression. I forced myself to look away from him as though untroubled by his scrutiny, and to stare casually around the room, and even as I did so I started, for I suddenly realized that we were not alone. Seated upon the bed, her coat discarded and looking more alluring than ever, was the girl. Our eyes met and for a long while I held her look, wondering how anyone so very fair could prove so very false. For now all my doubts had returned and increased a hundredfold, and there was a queer pain somewhere within me at the thought of her treachery. Something of this must have been apparent in my eyes, for, although she met my stare boldly enough, there was a certain pleading expression in hers which I found vaguely disturbing. For one wild moment I felt that she was trying to convey a message to me, a message of encouragement . . . but even as the thought came to me, I turned my gaze away. I refused to allow myself to be cajoled again. I looked back at Don Jose.

"You are peculiarly silent, Captain Graeme," he continued suddenly. "Have you nothing to say in your own defence? There must be some reason you would like to advance in explanation for your presence here in my wife's room to-night."

"*Your wife?*"

The words were startled out of me. I could have bitten my tongue off the moment I had spoken.

"But of course," said Don Jose calmly. "Did you not know that she was my wife?"

I cast a quick glance back at the girl. Her eyes were half closed, the long lashes dark against her skin, but even so they did not entirely conceal the expression that lay in them. I could not quite determine whether they showed anger or disgust, and again I felt that she was trying to send me a message, to convey to me by her expression that although her lips might be sealed yet she wished me to know the statement was a lie. I glanced at her left hand, it was bare of any ring. A gleam of hope came to me, but at once I banished it from my mind and hot, angry words rose to my lips.

"I beg your pardon, Don Jose," I said quietly, but I spoke very slowly and distinctly. "I didn't know that this lady was your wife. Had I known it I would certainly not have behaved so stupidly to-night."

He laughed, and the sound was devoid of humour: it was an unpleasant, grating noise which jarred upon my nerves but at the same time served a good purpose, for it awakened me afresh to the danger of my position.

"I will not stress the point," said Alvares quietly. "Nor will I stress your stupidity, Captain Graeme. Let me merely say that I am delighted to have this opportunity of a conversation with you. I would like first of all to congratulate both you and your friend on that remarkable performance at the reception in London this evening. I thought I had you all right that time."

"Had us?"

"Of course," said Alvares coolly. "You must know by this time that the gun was planted in your friend's pocket for a definite purpose. . . . I would have liked him to be arrested on a charge of attempting to murder me."

"So it wasn't genuine?"

Alvares looked puzzled.

"What wasn't genuine?"

"The attempt to shoot you."

He laughed.

"I thought I had told you," he said quietly, "that I have a devoted band of men—devoted to my money, at any rate—who protect me from such a possibility. No, my friend, there was a definite reason why I wanted both you and that interfering Frenchman out of the way for a little while. I must admit that the way in which you escaped from me in Brazil appealed to my sense of humour until I discovered that in order to facilitate it you had used the money which I gave you. Even then, however, I could not but admire your resource. Was that the best shot you have ever played, Captain Graeme, that shot which laid out the man who was on guard over you? "

I smiled: here I was on easy ground.

"No . . . about the worst, Don Jose. I half topped it, but it worked far better that way."

"It was certainly efficacious." Don Alvares smiled in quite a friendly manner. "I wondered how you kept the ball so low. You must tell me some time . . . you must give me a lesson—but not for the moment."

I decided to take the offensive: after all, someone has said that attack is the best form of defence.

"What is all this about?" I asked. "Why are you over here? Why did you want to get rid of Valais and myself?"

Don Jose remained unmoved.

"That, Captain Graeme, has got nothing to do with you. On the other hand, I did not wish for the dangers and difficulties of keeping you prisoners in a country which goes in for so much freedom of the individual." His lips curled into a smile: I wondered if the words were spoken in sarcasm, but I had little time in which to ponder this, for he continued at once: "I hoped that your own police would do that for me, and that you would spend a fortnight or so, at least, in prison while you were trying to clear yourselves. What I would like to know from you, Captain Graeme, is where the gun went which was planted on *you* as well as on your friend?"

"What?"

"You didn't know?"

"I knew nothing."

"You didn't get rid of it yourself?"

"Look here," I broke in quickly. "Let's get this quite clear. Do you mean to say a gun was planted on me, and when I was searched not found?"

"That," said Alvares, "is precisely what I do mean."

"Good Lord!" I said.

My astonishment was so obviously genuine that the Brazilian at once accepted my implied denial as fact.

He frowned.

"I should dislike to think, Captain Graeme," he said suddenly, "that there were other forces at work against me besides yourself and Valais, for that would mean more trouble for me. This latest happening seems to prove that there are others concerned. I have suspected this for some little time; in fact, quite a short time ago

I had the pleasure of removing a man whom I knew to be acting as intermediary between my enemies and yourself."

"Intermediary? I don't understand."

I was subjected then to a long scrutiny by the Bazilian, but I must have withstood it well, for from his next words it was obvious he had decided I had spoken the truth.

"You may understand some day, Captain Graeme," he said quietly. "At the moment, however, it is unlikely, owing to your own activities, that you will live long enough to get the whole story. I regret to have to talk to you like this, for an opponent worthy of my steel is an opponent whom normally I admire and have no wish to suppress entirely. I have previously come across one or two men of your stamp, but they have all been sensible: they have all finally been persuaded, by the weight of my financial argument, to work for me instead of against me. You and Valais have proved yourselves unreasonable, and as such you must be removed. Let me tell you that I would never have interfered with you again had you kept to your part of the bargain which you made in Brazil. But you didn't. Money, apparently, does not talk to you as it does to the average person. I am sorry, because I hate fools and I should like to like you. A man of resource is a valuable asset to a team such as I have raised, but he must understand the problems of life and realize that without money life is useless. I can remove that defect in you, but it is not worth my while."

He paused for a few moments, then:

"Urgent matters have necessitated my arrival in this country. I shall not be here long, but I must not be interfered with . . . that is why I am having this conversation with you. Will you give me your word, Captain Graeme—and if you give me your word I will see that you do not go unrewarded—that you will return to your home in Scotland first thing to-morrow morning, and stay there until you receive a message from me that you are free to do what you will? Or do you force me, Captain Graeme, to remove you from my path?"

I looked at him in surprise. The man seemed quite serious in making this preposterous statement. I thought of England, of the laws of the country, of our police, of Mr. Malcolm . . . and I looked again at him. But then I remembered Brazil and that fastness of his in the rocks, I remembered his power out there, his brutal nature, and I realized that in all probability he had spoken quite sincerely, and that I was indeed in the gravest personal danger.

Curiously enough, however, I felt anger rather than fear, and I glanced again at the girl who had brought all this upon me. But she appeared now to be quite indifferent to my presence in that room, and had apparently lost all interest in our conversation, for from the small bag which she carried she had removed a polishing-pad, and she was now rubbing this lightly across her nails. Even in that moment I found myself noticing the grace of her actions.

I looked back quickly at Don Alvares, and answered him in the only way I could.

" Don Jose," I said, " you are threatening me, but I would like to remind you that this is not your own country. You cannot do the things here that your graft has enabled you to achieve in South America. I think that is all I have to say to you."

The Brazilian flushed.

He rose to his feet, but he held his pistol in such a manner that it never wavered, but remained pointing all the time in my direction.

" In that case, Captain Graeme, we have nothing further to say to each other, but I will give you one chance. I will leave you to-night in which to think over your position. Remember my power, remember what I can do . . . as a recent example of what I can do in this country of yours think of what happened to-night in the Florian Hall. Something saved you. I don't know what it was, but if a gun had been found on you as well as your friend, you would not have been able to achieve your acrobatic, and I must say sensational, escape. You will admit the truth of that? "

I could not do otherwise: had I also been found with a gun there could have been no hope that I would ever have been able to leave the gallery and thus help Tony in his jump.

"Yes," I said.

"Very well then. You will go to your room, and in the morning we will meet at the breakfast-table . . . but make no attempt to escape, Captain Graeme. Remember my words . . . make no attempt to escape."

He placed his hand in the right-hand pocket of his coat, where I could see the ominous shape of the gun still pointing in my direction. He accompanied me to the door and held it open for me. As I was about to leave he suddenly stopped me.

"Have you forgotten your manners, Captain Graeme?" he said. "Wouldn't you like to say good night to the lady whom you came to visit?"

For a moment I looked at him, then I turned towards that girl for whom my feelings had so recently undergone two violent changes. Her eyes met mine and again they held a vague hint of pathos.

"Good night," I said gruffly.

"Good night," came her voice.

But I had already turned and left the room.

Don Jose accompanied me to my door. He went so far as to open it for me. He ushered me into my room. I thought of shouting, but I knew that it would be useless. His finger would close at once upon the trigger and my shout for help prove fatal. I was helpless and could do nothing but obey his instructions.

"Good night, Captain Graeme."

I looked at him standing in the doorway.

" Good night, Don Jose," I said.

" Think well over what I have said to you. It is for your own good, and I hope you will see your way to agree to my conditions."

" And if I don't . . . ? "

For a moment he paused.

" If you don't, Captain Graeme, you will not live to regret it."

The door closed.

For a moment I remained motionless, scarcely able to believe that I had really been present at that fantastic scene, but then I came back quickly to reality. I was in a tricky position, and I knew it. I knew also that I had no hope of reaching Tony to warn him or tell him what had happened. Perhaps even at that moment he also had been dealt with. And then I suddenly thought of the door. Perhaps Don Alvares had no intention of letting me live through that night, perhaps he was resolved to attack me unawares so that I should offer less resistance. I determined that I would lock that door so that no one could enter it during my sleep. But even as I went towards it I saw that the key was not there.

Now this was strange, and I was about to open the door and see whether the key could be on the other side when I heard an ominous sound. The key was turning in the lock: instead of locking myself in from outsiders I had myself been imprisoned. Quickly I dropped to my knees by the door and looked through the keyhole. The key had been removed, for I could just see through it, and even as I knelt there a voice came to me from the darkness outside.

"Don't try the window, Captain Graeme. There is a hair-brained man outside who has a light finger on a gun fitted with a hair trigger. I will not be responsible for his actions should you show yourself. Good night."

I rose to my feet. I went to my bed and sat down on it. I tried to marshal my thoughts, to think clearly. I knew that I had to think, that salvation—if salvation were possible—rested only on myself.

TEN

I DO not know how long I sat upon the bed struggling to regain mastery over my nerves and trying to disentangle out of the myriad thoughts which chased each other through my brain the essentials of the position in which I found myself. I think, however, that I must have sat there half dazed for rather longer than I supposed, when suddenly I heard the sound of voices outside my room, and a gleam of hope came to my somewhat shattered mind. Quickly I rose from the bed and darted to the door: kneeling, I looked through the keyhole, and noted that the passage outside was now lighted. But my range of vision was very limited and I could see nothing, although I still heard footsteps and indistinct words. I placed my ear to the keyhole, and immediately I could distinguish what was being said. The Brazilian was speaking, and from the sound of his voice I could at once sense the attitude he had adopted: obviously he was playing the part of a man well pleased with what he has achieved, and rather showing off before his inferiors.

" It is in that room," he was saying, " that the man who fired that shot at me to-night in London will be found. I was able to follow him down here, although he thought that he had safely made his escape. No doubt you were warned of the happening? "

Another voice answered him, an English voice, and in some way it seemed vaguely familiar.

" Yes, sir. All the police-stations were warned to look out for a touring, four-seater car with two passengers. You say the man is here? "

" In that room," replied Don Alvares.

" And where is his companion? "

There was a slight and almost imperceptible pause, and I very nearly shouted through that door, but for the moment something restrained me. I thought I would hear a little more before making my presence known.

" He has disappeared," said the Brazilian suddenly. " He came to this place with the man who tried to murder me: in fact, he helped him to escape, but what has happened to him now I have no idea."

" He was in that room."

A new voice had now interjected itself into the conversation, and at once I recognized it as that of the innkeeper.

" Yes," said the Brazilian quickly, " but I have looked there and it is empty. He must have gone."

" Probably lost his nerve," said the English voice, that of the man who was evidently a police official. "Well, sir, there's no point in dallying any more. We'd better take the fellow into custody and report to London for instructions."

"Very good," said the Brazilian. "I am happy to have been of assistance to your police."

"You did very well, sir," repeated the other, "extremely well, if I may say so. We are very much indebted to you for helping us like this. Not many men would have had the courage to chase a man who had just tried to shoot him."

And as I heard those words there flashed across my mind a memory of where I had last heard that voice, and as this realization came to me, all desire to announce my presence left me at once. I sensed that there was something here beyond my comprehension, some well-laid plan which must not be interfered with, but must be allowed to run its natural course. In my excitement I laughed to myself . . . for it was the voice of Mr. Malcolm I had heard, Mr. Malcolm, obsequious, the underling, acting the part of a police inspector for the benefit of the Brazilian, and quite obviously deceiving him entirely. I was thrilled, not so much at the resource of the man (for how on earth Mr. Malcolm could have got down from his flat in London to this part of the country in so short a space of time I could not understand), but with joy at the thought that although I had been fooled so neatly by the Brazilian, yet a much greater brain than mine had now taken up the battle from the point where I had suffered such a crashing defeat, and I felt confident of eventual victory. With renewed interest once again I glued my ear to the keyhole and listened intently. But I had apparently missed the rest of the conversation, for I now heard the sound of a door opening and a startled exclamation, which I recognized to be in the voice of Tony Valais. They were within his room by now, and I could not hear exactly what was being said, but it was obvious that Valais was treated with scant ceremony and ordered to dress himself quickly and accompany Mr. Malcolm and the uniformed policeman who was evidently with him.

For a moment I again had the desire to declare my presence, a longing actuated by the fear of being left alone in that inn in the power of the Brazilian. But at once I suppressed this desire, for I felt assured that Mr. Malcolm knew that I was there, but for his own good purpose had no intention of revealing that knowledge at the moment. I was completely satisfied that this should be so, for a sudden thought had come to me that the moment he was out of ear-shot of the Brazilian, Tony Valais would certainly declare the latter's statement regarding my departure to be a lie. A momentary fear entered my mind lest in his surprise at seeing Mr. Malcolm, Tony might betray some sign of recognition, but then I remembered the Frenchman's rare ability at this game of human poker, a game which he had played all his life, and I felt I could trust him not to reveal anything which might arouse the suspicions of Don Jose.

For a little longer I remained there crouching at the door, but little more was spoken. Suddenly I heard the sound of footsteps again, and realized that Tony was being removed by the police. Mr. Malcolm must have delayed in the passage for a moment or two longer with the Brazilian, for I overheard their conversation, and the conviction came to me that Mr. Malcolm was speaking with the definite intention that I should hear what was said, and that I should gain courage therefrom.

"Thank you very much again, sir," he said, "for all that you have done, and if you will accept them, my congratulations on your part in the affair."

"That is very kind of you," said the Brazilian, "very kind indeed. I am glad to have been of assistance, but you see I felt a personal desire to avenge this dastardly attack upon me."

"Quite a natural feeling, sir," said Mr. Malcolm; and I wondered whether the same feelings of growing anger at the blatant hypocrisy of this man were in his mind also. He continued at once: "I will be back in the morning, sir. No need to disturb you now to tell you what our instructions are from London. You will, of course, be required as a witness, and as it is more than likely that the man will be brought up before the magistrate in the morning, I must ask you not to leave this inn without letting me know."

" Certainly, certainly. Who shall I ask for? "

" Ask for Inspector Brown, sir," said Mr. Malcolm, without the slightest hesitation. " The Mitchling police-station."

" Inspector Brown. Right, Inspector."

" I don't think I shall be back before the morning," went on Mr. Malcolm slowly: and this part interested me instantly. " Anyway, I shan't trouble *you* again to-night." I noted the emphasis on the pronoun. " You say they came down by car? "

" Yes," said the Brazilian. " Shall I show it to you? It's in the garage."

" No, don't bother," said Mr. Malcolm. " I will go round there myself *now*. I know this inn pretty well. Good night, sir."

" Good night," said the Brazilian.

Again I felt an almost overwhelming desire to shout and beg Mr. Malcolm not to go away, for the realization that both he and Tony Valais were departing filled me with an anxious loneliness. But quickly I restrained myself. There was nothing to be done. I knew that I must not interfere in any way with Mr. Malcolm's plans. He was obviously concerned in some scheme known only to himself, and any uninformed interference on my part might easily ruin all his chances of success. For a moment I wondered at the astonishing bravado of the Brazilian, in that he had risked my making some noise which would have announced my presence in the room, and then I realized that possibly he had trusted either to my already being asleep or to the fact that he had made me a definite offer of liberty. How was he to know that I was well acquainted with the self-styled " Inspector Brown " who had made the arrest? How was he to know that I did not, like him, believe this to be an ordinary arrest on the part of the police, and was, therefore, only too anxious to retain my own liberty now that Tony Valais had so obviously lost his? As far as I knew, and indeed in all probability, the Brazilian had no knowledge of Mr. Malcolm, and only a vague suspicion that others were interested in his activities, apart from myself and Valais. He, therefore, probably relied on the fact that, realizing Tony was now lost to the forces against him, the other fifty per cent., in the form of myself, would endeavour at all costs to remain free in order to thwart his further efforts.

However, there was no need to advertise the fact that I had overheard all that had been happening. I knew that in a few seconds the light in the passage would be extinguished, and that at once the light in my room would be visible through the crack under the door to the Brazilian standing in the passage. A quick movement enabled me to switch it off, but I still crouched by the door in the darkness listening intently, trying to hear if anything else occurred. An ominous crack in the floor made me realize that the Brazilian had advanced to my door, and was, in fact, testing for himself the chances for and against my having overheard. I remained absolutely still and silent. In a moment or two I could just catch the sound of his retiring footsteps, although he was obviously endeavouring to be as quiet as possible. My little ruse had been successful. The Brazilian must now be confident in his own mind that I was completely unaware of this latest development.

I remained motionless, thinking of all that I had heard, and suddenly I realized the purport of Mr. Malcolm's words. Evidently he desired to prove for himself whether or no I were still in that inn. He had established the room which I had occupied, and spoken loudly for me to hear so that I could make some signal to him had I not disappeared, as Don Alvares had stated. Obviously he was awaiting this signal: he wanted just that little information from me. He had announced that he was going round to the garage, and would no doubt do so: this would give me my chance of showing him that I was still there. But even as I came to this point in my thoughts I at once appreciated that this would not be so easy as it sounded: what would happen should I show myself at the window—obviously the way in which Mr. Malcolm hoped to learn of my presence there? The Brazilian had warned me that there was a guard outside, " a hair-brained man " to use his own words, with a pistol from which the slightest touch on the trigger would discharge a messenger of death. I would have to be very careful indeed. I groped my way to the bed, for my room was now in complete darkness since the curtains were drawn and no moonlight was able to enter, and I sat there for a while deep in thought, trying to evolve some method by which I could make my presence known. I realized that I must be quick. I had wasted enough time already listening for the Brazilian and proving to myself that he was interested as to whether or no I knew of the arrest.

But then it suddenly occurred to me that all my fears were groundless. The guard which the Brazilian had posted by the window would certainly not allow himself to be observed by Mr. Malcolm, so that even did I show myself he would never pull that trigger while Mr. Malcolm was near. I jumped up and made for the window, but before I reached it I realized that my difficulties were not over. In showing myself to Mr. Malcolm I must be careful that the Brazilian guard did not also see me, since he would undoubtedly report my actions to his master, upon which reprisals would almost certainly be immediate. I stopped midway between my bed and the curtains, undecided, and filled with that constant companion to indecision . . . unhappiness.

Then suddenly an idea came to me. If I kept the curtains as a background and merely showed the top of my head while I looked out of the window, I could not be observed from the outside provided I showed as little of myself as possible. I could then watch, try to pick out the guard, try to pick out Mr. Malcolm, try to seize a moment when Mr. Malcolm was looking towards the windows and the guard was looking towards Mr. Malcolm, and thereupon show the flash of a match just for a second only. That would be all he would require to tell him what he wanted, and I would have an excellent chance of avoiding betraying to the guard the fact that I was providing Mr. Malcolm with this information.

Very carefully, on hands and knees, I approached the window. I moved the curtains back so that they formed a perfect dark background to me, and very gradually I lifted my head over the level of the sill, just sufficiently to let me see through the glass. I was lucky in that it was a moonlit night. Almost at once I caught sight of my guard standing by some trees just to the left of the garage. Evidently Mr. Malcolm had not yet made an appearance—for which I gave a thankful sigh of relief—for the guard was making no attempt to conceal himself, but was leaning against a tree, a cigarette between his lips, his right hand rather ominously in his pocket, his left supporting him against the trunk. But even as I watched I realized that I had only just been in time, for with a sudden movement he threw the cigarette to the ground and stamped upon it: his right hand came from his pocket, and I saw the sudden gleam of the moonlight reflected on the steel. He withdrew two or three paces into the wood. I could see that his attention was entirely fixed upon the pathway which led from the front door of the inn to the garage, and I also looked along this, taking from my pocket a box of matches, extracting one and holding it ready between the fingers of my right hand.

Suddenly Mr. Malcolm came into view. He was dressed in a dark suit of clothes, which made him less easily discernible than was my guardian, and he advanced along that path without looking to right or left, rather like a shadow. I cast another quick glance at the guard, and realized that all his attention was concentrated on Mr. Malcolm. Were the latter to look towards the window now I could easily give him the information he required. And suddenly he did so. His glance was but momentary, however, and took me completely by surprise. I cursed myself for my inaction. Would I get another chance? I knew Mr. Malcolm could not look openly at the house, for no doubt he was also under observation from another window, that of the room occupied by Don Jose Alvares. His movements would have to be quite casual, just as had been that fleeting glance. He dared not concentrate for any length of time. I felt I would have to be very quick and absolutely ready for the next time he looked towards me. Once again I stared at that light-fingered gentleman, who was even now handling his revolver lovingly among the trees: I guessed, however, that he had received strict orders not to betray his presence unless I made an attempt to escape. He was crouching in the wood and quite concealed from the view of Mr. Malcolm: indeed, had I not observed him before, smoking his cigarette, I would not have known that he was there, so hidden was he by the shadows of the night. His whole attitude revealed that his attention was entirely engrossed with Mr. Malcolm, and that for the moment I was safe from his regard. Quickly I looked back at Mr. Malcolm, and even as I did so the chance came. Mr. Malcolm was now only a few yards from the garage. He suddenly looked up towards the house, and even as he did so I struck a match below the level of the sill, held it up before my face for an instant, and at once blew it out. Almost immediately Mr. Malcolm had glanced away again, but suddenly I saw him rub his hands together as he walked, and I knew that this was a signal of encouragement to me showing that he had seen me. The action gave me confidence: it was that of a happy man, a man who was pleased with what was happening, and I realized that he must be satisfied with the progress of his little plan. I decided there was no harm in my continuing to watch from the window, for I knew I could not be seen. He disappeared into the garage and was there for two or three minutes. During this time I watched the Brazilian guard, but he did not move: he remained concealed in the trees, acting, apparently, according to the orders he had received. Then suddenly Mr. Malcolm reappeared and walked from the garage back along the path, an obvious purpose in his stride. He never glanced towards the house again, and here was another proof that I had been successful in giving him the information which he desired as to my presence there. He vanished around the corner of the house out of my view.

For a few moments I remained where I was, watching for his possible return, watching also that man who was so effectually preventing my escape from the inn: but for quite a long time—five minutes or so, I should judge—the Brazilian remained absolutely motionless within the wood. At last, however, he seemed to have decided that Mr. Malcolm had gone for good, for I suddenly saw a movement, and soon he had returned to his original position and was once again leaning his back against the trunk of the tree. He withdrew his hand from his right-hand pocket. He was now in full view from my room, and I could see the bulge in that pocket made by the revolver which he had been ordered to use against me. He took from another pocket a packet of cigarettes: I saw him select one and light it. Once again he resumed his vigil, leaning back against the tree, his right hand clutching his revolver, and I saw that his eyes were now fixed upon my window. I made no movement. I was confident now that I could not be observed unless I showed myself. I watched him, half amused. I realized that sleep would be impossible for me that night, impossible and perhaps dangerous, and that I could do worse than watch this man for a few more moments. I noticed the almost insolent manner in which he made no attempt to conceal his presence, and realized that possibly he had been ordered to show himself in just such a way so that I could not mistake his intention should I make any essay at escape.

But as I crouched there, turning it all over in my mind, wondering if there was any possible method by which I could outwit him, and then again wondering whether I ought to make any such attempt in view of the fact that I had, at his implied request, revealed my presence in that room to Mr. Malcolm, and that any action towards leaving it might now upset his plans, I was suddenly startled out of my ruminations by something which happened in front of my eyes. Two figures seemed to loom up out of the shadows, one on each side of the Brazilian guard. The cigarette dropped from between his lips and fell to the ground unheeded. Almost before I had time to realize what had happened, the man had been withdrawn into the wood by force with something which looked extraordinarily like a towel over his head to mute his voice.

And even as he was withdrawn under these powerful hands, another figure took up a position against that tree, another figure which also had a cigarette between its lips, another figure which stood in exactly the same position and wore clothes which seemed, at that distance, to be identical with those of the now absent guard.

I recognized a suspicious likeness in this figure to that of Tony Valais.

ELEVEN

SCARCELY daring to breathe, so excited was I, I remained there, quite impervious to the growing sense of cramp in my limbs, crouched with only my eyes over the level of the sill, watching the scene before me. Everything had occurred so suddenly, so abruptly, that I realized that unless Don Jose happened to be looking out of his window at the crucial moment and had seen what I had seen, he could have had no suspicion of the happening, for an interval of but a few seconds had elapsed between the removal of the Brazilian guard and the reappearance of a figure sufficiently like him to take his place. That risk, I realized, Mr. Malcolm had to take, and I waited, almost fearing to breathe, listening for some sound or sign from Don Jose to reveal whether or no he had observed the substitution. Evidently Mr. Malcolm also awaited the same thing, and once again I withdrew the box of matches from my pocket and extracted one, ready to give him a signal in case I should hear anyone come to my door. The seconds dragged by . . . the minutes dragged by . . . but no sound came, and at last I felt assured that so far luck had been with us, and that Mr. Malcolm's ruse had been entirely successful. I wondered how I could communicate that fact to him, but I need not have disturbed myself, for suddenly, around the corner of the garage, I saw a figure wearing dark clothes, a figure unmistakable to me now as I knew it so well. It was Mr. Malcolm who now darted across the intervening space between the house and the trees with surprising agility. I realized that he was going to walk along the wall of the inn in such a manner that he would not be discernible either by myself or by anyone watching from the other windows, unless a head was actually protruded over the ledge. I understood also that it was up to me to evolve some method whereby Mr. Malcolm could reach my room, for obviously it was his intention to communicate with me. There was no need for me to hide myself from the outside. On the other hand, I could not show a light in my room for fear lest Don Jose had not yet gone to bed and might see the reflection outside from his own window. I left the curtains and moved back into the room itself, and at once my mind flew to the bedclothes which covered my bed. Even as I knotted the sheets and blankets together as securely as I could, I recalled the numerous stories I had heard and read of other escapes and entries made by just such a means when the rooms lay upon an upper floor. I remembered Gretna Green, and wondered in how many cases the prelude to such romantic adventures had been escape effected by a similar makeshift rope.

I returned with this to the window, opened it as quietly as I could, and looked out carefully. My first glance was not down to see if Mr. Malcolm was directly below, but to my right to see whether any other windows were open and if we were being observed. But I drew a sigh of relief, for apparently no one was watching us. I looked down then, and saw Mr. Malcolm standing below me looking up. A gravel path wound round the inn, but Mr. Malcolm was standing on the narrow grass border which edged a flower-bed. I showed him the rope. It was my intention to tie one end to the bedpost and then slip down the rope to join Mr. Malcolm below. He must have realized this, for at once he shook his head, and then made signs to indicate that he wished me to drop the rope down for him to use for ingress. I was at a loss to understand his reason, for surely escape was the essential thing, but unquestioningly I set about obeying his instructions. I let down one end of the rope—my room being on the first floor, this was amply long enough for the purpose—but first I signalled to Mr. Malcolm not to start climbing until I had firmly knotted the other end to the bedpost. I did this, drawing the bed up close against the wall—a matter of some difficulty for it was a heavy iron bedstead, but I accomplished it without any noise, thanks to the thick carpet with which the floor was covered. I then looked out again and motioned to Mr. Malcolm that all was well.

For a man of his age and figure he climbed up that makeshift rope with amazing rapidity and skill, and he was already at the ledge of the window before I had anticipated. Quickly swinging his legs over, with my help he clambered in, and I made as if to pull up the rope after him. But he stopped me, and placing his lips to my ear, he whispered clearly:

" I don't like being in any position where retreat is completely cut off."

I nearly laughed, but I said no word and left the rope where it was. Mr. Malcolm then came right into the room and seated himself on the edge of the bed. By a gentle pressure on my arm he drew me with him. The room was now in complete darkness, for the moon had gone behind a cloud, and but for the sound of Mr. Malcolm's breathing, I would still have believed myself to be alone. I felt again as though all this must be happening in a dream, so fantastic did it seem for me to be sitting so near to this man whom, until a very little while ago, I had believed to be many miles away in London. But what, in any case, were we doing there? Surely the obvious thing was for us both to escape while escape was possible. I turned to him eagerly.

" Oughtn't we to be going at once? " I said. " Don Jose may soon be prowling about, you know."

Mr. Malcolm's voice came to me through the darkness.

" I'm sorry," he said, " but I haven't come to rescue you . . . yet. I've got a lot to tell you . . . and then I'm going, but you'll have to stay here for a while after I've gone."

His words filled me first with a startled disappointment, which quickly changed to interest and surprise. I waited eagerly for him to continue.

"Listen," he whispered suddenly, "listen to me attentively. I am going to clear up your mind on several points before I ask you a few questions. In the first place, Alec—danger makes us all brothers, doesn't it? so I presume I may call you by your Christian name—I am afraid I allowed you to misunderstand my position up in Scotland. I was detailed by the Foreign Office not as a bodyguard to look after you, but really as a bodyguard to see that you did not get into mischief. We knew, you see, of the activities of this Alvares in Brazil. We knew, of course, of your part, and we had a perfectly frank report from you when you returned. We knew also a thing which you did not know—that the Brazilians themselves are tired of the tyranny of this Alvares, and have been making plans to overthrow him. This they could not do in Brazil itself because of the power graft has given the man, but certain relatives of those whom he has murdered and despoiled, discovering that he was on his way to England, clubbed together, and with all their funds managed to equip an ocean-going yacht to follow him. They did this and did not travel in the ordinary way in order that they should appear to be merely a party of tourists, and in order, as far as they could, to conceal the fact that they were following Alvares from Brazil . . . a thing which would not have been possible had they taken ordinary berths on a passenger ship. They reached England some little time after Alvares himself arrived, and they are, as a matter of fact, lying off the coast just outside Southampton Water, not very far from here. Their first action on arriving was, as we had anticipated, to try to enlist your help against Alvares, for they knew that you knew more about him than anybody else . . . with the possible exception of Valais, whom they did not know how to get hold of since he was in France. They sent a messenger to you.

" At this point I must tell you that Alvares apparently got wind of their arrival, for he was on the look-out and he had you watched. That you yourself noticed when you went up from London to Scotland by car. He hoped by means of you to get in touch with his enemies and discover exactly who they were and where they came from. They had sent, in the meantime, a messenger to try to enlist your help against him, and this messenger fell into the hands of Alvares just before he was able to give you the information which he had been sent to do. Alvares's men attempted to get out of this little man, that night in that wood near the Inverness road, all that he had been instructed to tell you and the whereabouts of the men who had sent him, but he stuck to his vow and refused to divulge any information . . . a fact which cost him his life. We have deduced all this from what we have been able to establish—Scotland Yard can establish almost anything, you know—since we have discovered that a very broad-shouldered little man is missing from the Brazilian party, the man who was found murdered in that wood near the Inverness road.

" We are very near these Brazilians now. Excuse me for rushing this story, but we must be very careful. We have little time, and I am going down to-night immediately to get at the whole truth of their presence here. Unfortunately, you see, we cannot let them do their worst to Alvares, at least not in this country. The laws of England do not allow violence no matter how richly it may be deserved." He smiled. " Lynch law won't do over here. On the other hand, our difficulty is that we have nothing against Alvares in this country—but we don't want him here. We cannot arrest him and deport him as an undesirable back to Brazil, where he would be dealt with probably by this secret society in a manner which he richly deserves. We want to get something on him. It is possible that you may be able to get it for us."

He paused and I broke in quickly.

" If you want any corroborative evidence," I said, " I've just seen him, as perhaps you know, and he has practically admitted that it was on his instructions that the little man was murdered . . .

that he was a messenger to me from Don Jose's enemies."

For a moment Mr. Malcolm was silent, then he continued still in the same quiet voice, so that I had to lean forward to catch his words.

"Yes," he said, "we want an absolutely clear case against him. We want to know why he is here . . . that is most important. He is up to something which I am convinced is pretty dirty, and it is absolutely essential that we should know exactly what it is and obtain proof against him. That is why I pretended to be a police official to-night."

"How on earth did you get here?" I asked in astonishment.

"How did you, for that matter?" replied Mr. Malcolm.

There was a mischievous note in his voice which I was quick to detect.

"We . . . I . . ."

"You very nearly got into very hot water indeed," said Mr. Malcolm. "Luckily, Alec, I have friends in all sections of the community, and yesterday afternoon I met a little pickpocket whom I was responsible for running in some years ago. As a matter of fact, he is a very nice little fellow, and—a rare thing in these days—extraordinarily efficient at his job. I had an idea. I knew that I myself could not gain admittance to that Brazilian show without coming under some form of suspicion, and in any case I wanted to remain right out of it so that I would not be known to Alvares should an occasion arise—such as did actually occur this evening—when such lack of recognition was invaluable. So I sent him in."

"You sent him in—the crook?" I gasped.

"And be very thankful that I did," said Mr. Malcolm. "I sent him in to watch you two and to see that nothing happened to you. If anything did he was to report to me outside at once. Something did happen to you—a gun was planted on each of you and my little friend, knowing all about the technique of that particular job, saw it happen. Unfortunately he only saw the gun being planted on you and did not notice Valais. Without alarming you in any way he managed to remove that gun."

"Good Lord," I said, "do you mean that little fellow who pushed past me?"

"No doubt," said Mr. Malcolm, "that is quite a usual method in his trade. He brought me that gun and told me the story, and I got the rest from the police and realized that he had missed half his job. But should he have succeeded in getting away with the gun planted on Valais as well, none of this would have happened. So probably it is just as well that he didn't."

"Just as well?"

"Yes," said Mr. Malcolm. "I am hoping that we are shortly coming to the end of this Brazilian interference. We have rather forced his hand and I hope it will go well."

"You still haven't told me," I reminded him, "how you got down here."

"I was waiting outside . . . in fact my little friend Alfred, known to his intimates as Alf, had just returned to me with the gun which he had removed from your pocket, when I saw the pair of you hurtling out and realized that something pretty serious was up. I had anticipated just some such action on your part, for just before you came out in such a hurry a young lady, who, I must say, looked very lovely, and whom I had little difficulty in recognizing from your description of her, came out from the Hall also in a hurry. She looked around her, saw that the road was deserted—as I was still concealed—and took up a strategic position in your car under the canvas cover. She was very careful, before she finally settled down, to remove any signs which might have revealed her advent to the car. I saw you two rush out and drive off. Her idea struck me as being a good one. I knew Alvares's car was outside too: I knew which it was, and I was careful not to let it out of my sight. As a matter of fact I had my own car just around the corner, and you know what it is . . . small, unobtrusive, but extremely rapid when necessary. Alvares himself left the building very shortly after you did. He went to the flat which he has rented in London, but it was a curious fact that his car remained outside this flat, evidently waiting for someone or something. So did I. About two hours later a telephone message came through to that flat. I was wandering about in the street and could clearly hear the bell ringing in the building. At that time of night it was easy to hear it as there was little traffic in the streets. Almost immediately Don Alvares reappeared and went off, evidently in a great hurry, with three men in the car. Needless to say, I followed. He brought me here."

"So she let him know?"

"Of course she let him know," said Mr. Malcolm. "What else did you think she travelled with you for?"

I laughed a trifle bitterly.

"Everything but the obvious."

I sensed that Mr. Malcolm was looking at me in the darkness, but evidently he decided to ignore my words for the moment.

"She let him know all right," he said. "When he came down here I saw her signal to him from her window."

My heart sank. I realized now how completely we had been gulled. All the time she was talking to us she must have been calculating as to the exact moment when Don Alvares would arrive. I remembered the crazy way in which I had championed her against Tony's accusations, and the memory was not pleasant. But Mr. Malcolm's next words forced my attention back to him again.

"We have got something on Jose Alvares," he said quietly, "but nothing very much. We want to know why he is here and what he is doing. That man is dangerous and he does things in a big way. Something very serious may be about to happen at his direction, and we have got to stop it if we can. Give him a bit of noose, say I, and with it let him hang himself. That is why I am pretending that we are helping him all we can, pretending that the police have no suspicions about him. That is why your status here as a prisoner must not be interfered with for the present. Tell me what has happened."

Very briefly, in the same sketchy manner as that in which Mr. Malcolm himself had told his story, I described all that had occurred in the inn that night.

" Yes," said Mr. Malcolm quietly, " yes."

For a long while he paused, and I was careful not to disturb his thoughts.

" Look here," he said suddenly. " I am going down to the coast now. I am going to see those Brazilians, to find out exactly what they are after . . . and see whether they know what he is doing here. I shall inform them that I come as a messenger from you and say nothing about being connected with the police. I shall say that you sent me . . . that you dared not come yourself after what happened to the messenger which they sent to you, but that you want them to repeat the message to me so that I can give it to you. That will be a good excuse. I shall go now and shall be back, I hope, before daylight. What time is it? "

I felt for my watch. It was not in my pocket. Rather astonished, I realized that my chain, match-box and watch all had gone.

"I don't know," I said. "My watch has gone."

"Gone?" said Mr. Malcolm in a curiously muffled voice.

"Yes . . . it's certainly gone," I said. "It must have been stolen."

"Never mind," said Mr. Malcolm; his voice sounded rather choking, and instantly I knew that he was on the verge of laughter. "Never mind, I'll make Alf give it back to you!"

He rose to his feet and moved over to the window: there he stopped and turned to me, and he was now quite serious.

"Alec," he said, "if I am not back in time and the Brazilian keeps to his word, give him that promise and go to Scotland."

"Good Lord!" I said, "I can't do that . . . I . . ."

"Shut up," said Mr. Malcolm, and there was authority in his voice. "We are working as a team for the destruction of this criminal. You must do as you are told. If I am not back as I say, you must protect yourself . . . give him your word and keep to it. If, on the other hand, the Brazilian does not intend to keep to his arrangement and attempts any funny business . . . well, you know Tony Valais is outside, and take this, anyway . . . it might be useful."

He handed me a small automatic which I slipped into my pocket.

"Thank you, Mr. Malcolm," I said gratefully.

"*De rien*," replied that amazing man, as his head disappeared over the window-sill.

I watched him descend: I watched him creep away over that short but dangerous intervening space between the house and the wood, and then I pulled up the makeshift rope. Quickly I unknotted its sections and re-made the bed: it looked somewhat dishevelled, but when I had replaced the eiderdown this was not so apparent. I pulled the bed back cautiously into the middle of the room, and then closed the window. I returned to the bed wondering what to do, whether to undress properly or merely to lie down upon it as I was. I decided against both ideas, for I knew it was more than likely that I should fall asleep . . . and sleep was unsafe for me that night. But even as I came to this conclusion I heard a noise which startled me into instant attention. My hand slipped to the automatic in my pocket, every muscle in my body was ready poised for action . . . for the sound I had heard was that of a key turning in the lock of my door.

Thus expectant I waited, tense, ready for anything. Anything but what actually occurred: there was something very secretive about the opening of that door, something suggesting that it had no connection with a proposed attack against me. It opened . . . and then shut. Someone was in that room with me, and suddenly in a blinding flash I realized the identity of the intruder.

The fragrance of violets was in the air, and I knew that the girl had come to visit me.

TWELVE

A WARNING, sibilant little sound came from the girl as she stood there so close to me, yet hidden from my sight by the prevailing darkness. It told me all that I so urgently wanted to know in that moment—that she was, on the surface, at any rate, my friend once more in this stolen, nocturnal visit. And yet how could I now believe in her, after the disastrous result of that previous rendezvous which I had kept, expecting . . . what? . . . and had lost my liberty in consequence?

Abruptly I sensed the battle which was raging already within my mind. Common sense told me that she was an imposter in her proffered friendship, that she was but the alluring tool of this Brazilian monster whom I had sworn to expose. And yet my instinct told me otherwise: except for this one—what should I call it?—" lapse," perhaps—all her sudden and mysterious appearances in the exciting chain of events which lately had tumbled over each other in bewilderingly rapid sequence had been friendly—even useful to my cause. She had made no attempt to frustrate us in our escape when standing on the slope which rose abruptly from the level of that alligator-infested river in the tropics; she had smiled and waved to Tony and myself, quite evidently wishing us good fortune; she had expressed in direct words her horror of the fate which had befallen that poor, broad-shouldered little messenger who had tried so hard to fulfil his trust and given his most precious possession—life itself—for the safe keeping of the message which had been confided to him for my ears only; and she had given me that hint which had enabled me to put the puzzled police on the right track, and discover his identity.

But against that she had lured me to the very centre of that web which had been made by the Brazilian for my frustration, so that I could not disentangle myself free, so that my life itself might be the price which I would have to pay.

Why?

I know that it is the privilege of a woman to act entirely illogically at all times, to encourage merely to abash, to help merely to frustrate. But in her case I could not help considering, albeit even now unwillingly, that her performance had been deliberately and definitely over the agreed orders. A man expects a woman to be mysterious, even dangerous, but he does not like her to prove fatal.

It was with very mixed feelings, therefore, that I rose to my feet to receive her: instinct again, for I nearly laughed out loud when I realized that she could not see me, that she could not appreciate the courtesy which I could not help hoping she did not expect.

Her voice came to me out of the darkness, very low yet with that strangely vibrant quality which had already fascinated me.

" Where are you? "

" Here."

" Where's ' here '? "

I smiled. I would have laughed, but to laugh would have been dangerous.

" I'm sitting on the bed," I whispered, and sat down again.

" Is there anything between me and the bed that I might knock over? "

" Nothing."

She came towards me. I could feel her approach rather than see it, although my eyes were accustomed to the darkness, and now I could vaguely make out the outline of her slender figure. She was coming straight towards me, and I held out my hand towards hers and took it in order to guide her. As I touched her fingers I heard a startled intake of breath: my action evidently had been unexpected. Once again I smiled to myself in the darkness.

She came and sat beside me, but for a few moments she said no word. I wondered what was going on in the brain which I had reason to suspect as tortuous: I wondered how the attack—or the explanation—was to be made. And as I sat there waiting I was conscious of two things: one, a desire to laugh at this ridiculous and compromising situation, but paramount an ever-increasing desire to seize in my arms this vulture—or angel—regardless of all that I might think of her, and touch her lips with mine.

And as I waited, I found myself considering the weakness of the average man—for in this manner I could describe myself—in the presence of such a girl: the futility of brawn matched against beauty.

She spoke again just then, rather nervously, I thought.

" What do you think of me? "

I paused: here was a really difficult question, but she gave me no time to consider an answer, for she went on at once:

" Oh, I am not asking for a compliment: the time for banter and compliments has gone."

She stopped again, and I noted with discomfort that there was a real note of distress in her voice. Tears were not very far away, and I hate tears, crocodile or genuine. Much to my relief, however, as she continued the possibility of tears receded: her voice gained in strength and purpose, although pitched very low.

" You must think everything which is awful of me? "

The words as spoken formed a question: I countered with another:

" Don't you think your presence here a little odd . . . if you are Don Jose's wife? "

" His wife? Don't tell me you believed that story! "

I laughed very softly, but it sounded just as cynical as I meant it to sound.

"Perhaps you'll tell me how to select just what to believe?"

"I know. I'm sorry."

She paused for a few moments, and then the words came with a rush, punctuated here and there by attractive little hesitancies.

"I ask you to believe that I mean you . . . and your French friend . . . no harm. I ask you to believe that I am not Alvares's wife—nor—his mistress. I must do what he tells me, because three years ago I gave my word to save . . . some who are very dear to me. I can tell you no more now . . . not till to-morrow."

She stopped. She seemed to be at a loss for words to explain further. I prompted her gently:

"Why not until to-morrow?"

"Because my bondage . . . my promised three years . . . are up to-morrow. I think Alvares has forgotten, but to-morrow I shall leave him."

I sat in silence, deep in thought: what on earth was this strange girl trying to tell me? Was she asking me—a matter-of-fact Scotsman—to believe in some fairy story of a beautiful girl and promised service of body and of soul over a period of years? Did such things still happen in this enlightened and civilized world?

Suddenly the girl spoke.

"It is my birthday to-morrow," she said. "I shall be twenty-one."

I felt foolish.

"Many happy returns of the day," I said stupidly, because I felt I had to say something. I was astonished beyond measure at the result of my idiotic words.

"Oh, you do mean that?" she said quickly, her hand seeking and finding mine. "Tell me you do mean that?"

"Why, of course."

"Thank you. It gives me courage. It makes me feel that you don't hate me after all. You don't, do you?"

For a moment I did not answer; this silence was not because I did not know the answer to the question, admittedly difficult though it was: I knew, such is masculine frailty to female charm, that I could never hate this glorious creature no matter how twisted might be her sense of loyalty. I hesitated because the girl was now in such a surprisingly different mood from that in which I had always previously spoken with her. She was humble now: she was contrite, and seemed to want to say "sorry" but not to know how to pronounce the word. I felt my heart going out to her in her difficulty, whatever it might be: I felt that I wanted to help all I could, and I gave her fingers, still resting in mine, just a little unnecessary pressure.

But even as I did so, I realized that I might once again literally be playing into her hands, dancing a tune to music set by her. I released her fingers suddenly, too abruptly, for I felt rather than saw her turn her head and look at me. I felt in an agony of doubt, and inwardly I soundly cursed that doubt. What could I say? What could I do? How could I satisfy my caution and make myself believe? What could persuade me?

Suddenly I turned to her.

"Does Alvares know you are here?"

It was an unnecessary question after all her care not to be overheard, but I wanted to hear her say it.

"No."

"You don't want him to know you are here?"

"Of course not."

"Why?"

"I think . . . I think . . . he might do anything to me."

She spoke the melodramatic words with all sincerity, and I could not doubt that she spoke only the truth.

"Then why have you come?"

"To warn you."

This was better: this was more like the girl in the garage than the girl who had sat on another bed not so long before polishing her nails whilst the man whom she had trapped was staring into the business end of a loaded revolver. I felt for and found her fingers.

"To warn me of what?"

She leant towards me, and the scent of her hair came to my nostrils and did its best to intoxicate my senses: but I knew in that moment, although I could not have explained if challenged, why my instinct was so emphatic, that her action was not made consciously in order to sway me once more within her power. She moved towards me, probably unknowingly, in order to lessen the chance of being overheard, in order to make quite sure that I would hear and mentally digest every word of her warning.

"Listen: *he* has no intention of letting you out of his clutches, no matter what decision you may tell him that you have come to in the morning. There are two reasons why he didn't kill you out of hand to-night: the first is that, like most foreigners"—she laughed gently—"he has a great respect for your British police; but the second is the most important, and the one which swayed him to his actual course of action: he hates you, Captain Graeme. He's gloating over you: he hates you like only he can hate."

"Doesn't he hate Tony Valais, too?"

I could not resist the question: somehow I could not see that I had done more than Tony to inconvenience Don Jose, and somehow I felt that I should be less uncomfortable in the unwelcome glare of the Brazilian's hate if I had the company of my friend.

"Not half as much. He doesn't think that Valais counts for so much as you do. He cannot forget that it was you who laid out his man in Brazil, and thus got away. And he does not forget that his enemies attempted to get in touch with you, and not with Valais, when they got to Europe."

"That was only," said I, "because they didn't know where to look for him."

"Really? How do you know that?"

I believe I did trust her now, but there was no point in presenting her with information.

"Never you mind. Well, what does *he* propose to do to me?"

"Kill you, of course," she said.

She said it simply, so simply that the incredible statement sounded perfectly normal even in that typically old-fashioned Hampshire inn. I expected some such words, and I was not surprised: but I smiled to myself in the darkness and thanked God for Mr. Malcolm.

"When?" I asked: and then I added: "How?"

"How I wish I could tell you!"

It was a real heart-cry, and I warmed to her as I heard the words. I realized that she had broken down my suspicions, that I was prepared to accept her story, vaguely as she had told it. She was so very different in that strange conversation from anything which she had been before, so completely sincere. I longed with every fibre of my being for a little light that I might see the expression on her face, that thus I might dispel for ever my fears—for they were fears—that she did not mean everything she said. But further words interrupted my thoughts.

"I'd give anything to tell you how to guard against him, but I can't. You see, I simply don't know: but from what he said to me I do know he means to destroy you. He destroys everything that he finds in his way."

"What did he say?"

"He said he liked playing with your hopes and fears, and he was going to make you suffer—mentally—horribly—before he shot you out of life."

Her voice almost broke as she said those words.

"Does it matter to you so much?"

I knew that I was asking an unfair question, but for the life of me I simply could not help it. She did not answer for a few seconds, and I sensed that she was considering my question, that perhaps she realized what it portended.

"Yes," she said finally, in rather a small voice. But she went on at once and spoilt it all, and I wondered if there was a mischievous light in those adorable eyes. "Why, of course it does. I feel I put you in his power: God knows I could not help myself, but still . . . the fact remains, and if you died at his hands I should feel that it was partly at my hands as well."

I remained silent, for I did not know what to say: she had been so very near me at one moment, only to draw herself away, characteristic of the baffling creature which she was, almost at once. Even her fingers had been slipped from mine.

"But he intends to kill you . . . in his own abominable way." Her voice was urgent, although she never raised it above a whisper. "Take care! Remember that he hates you."

She rose to her feet and stood beside me.

"I am going, Captain Graeme. I have been away quite long enough: it isn't likely, but he might come to my room to see that I am sleeping safely. I am not certain that he wholly trusts me any more. And, in any case, I must return the key of this room."

"Why shouldn't I escape now that you've unlocked my door?"

I asked the question suddenly: I had no intention of disobeying Mr. Malcolm's instructions to remain, especially now that I knew that a friend and not an enemy was on guard outside my window, but I wanted to see what she would say.

"You can't!" She spoke quietly, almost sadly. "He's got a man outside, and another in the hall at the bottom of the stairs. Both are killers, both would shoot at sight."

Suddenly I realized to the full the risks that this girl had run in order to bring me her warning message: I took her hand in mine.

"What's your name?" I asked.

She knew what I meant at once: but I could scarcely hear her answer.

"Rosario."

"Listen, Rosario. Why don't you tell me now all that you know? Why don't you . . . ?"

"I can't! I *must* wait till to-morrow."

" Why? "

" I've told you."

" But now is so nearly to-morrow. In fact, it *is* to-morrow. Yes, yes, Rosario "—the words trembled over each other in my eagerness—" we are in the early hours of your to-morrow *now*, so you *can* tell me."

" I can't, I can't." The girl was nearly crying. " Oh, don't tempt me."

I seized my chance, and thus met with my defeat.

" Is it a temptation? "

" Of course! Why do you ask such questions? Don't you know that I *hate* him, that I . . ."

She stopped. I breathed one great sigh of contentment: then was not the time to make her complete that sentence: I wanted, when she did, to see her face.

Gently I drew her to me, and she came unresisting.

" Rosario," I said: the name intoxicated me. " I'm sorry because it is at such short notice, but Alec is going to kiss Rosario."

" I think not," said a hated voice, and the room was suddenly flooded in light.

THIRTEEN

Don Jose Alvares stood by the door, which I remember noticing with surprise was shut behind him. He had evidently been enabled to enter, so rapt were Rosario and myself in our conversation—dare I say in each other?—without attracting our attention and giving any warning of his loathsome presence. He stood there smiling, a smile which was as far divorced from humour as I am certain were his thoughts, a smile which was but a caricature and about as natural, a smile which twisted his thin, cruel lips almost into a snarl.

Don Jose Alvares was very angry. Of that there could be no possible doubt. His face was flushed, which gave it an unnatural, unhealthy colour: his eyes shone with a light which was plainly vicious: his whole frame was tense, and the knuckles of his fingers showed white as he gripped the automatic, which I noticed for the first time, with an obviously unnecessary vigour.

" Just so! " said Don Jose Alvares: and then again: " Just so! "

He remained silent, and so did we. There had been nothing guilty about our relationship, and curiously enough we had not been startled out of our pose. True, we had stood apart as he had spoken his first words, but I still felt the reassuring grip of Rosario's fingers in mine, and I drew confidence therefrom. But one thing was very obvious: the gun which I could feel nestling uncomfortably in my pocket was about as useful to me as was the unsuspecting Tony Valais outside: he could see no light through the heavy curtains; I could no more reach my gun than vanish into thin air without inviting a well-directed messenger of death from the ominous Brazilian.

"Rosario," he said suddenly, and I could have killed him where he stood for his familiarity, quite forgetting that probably he had infinitely the more right between us to use her little name. "Go and stand over by the fireplace."

Without a word the girl did as she was told; and I felt, as her fingers gently disentangled themselves from mine, that I was being left quite alone to face this sinister individual. I looked at her for a moment as she passed me: she smiled to me, but it was a wistful smile, a smile which seemed to tell me that we had been very near complete understanding, only to have that hope dashed literally from our lips.

I could not bear it: I turned savagely towards my tormentor.

But it was he who spoke first and not I.

"So you are corrupting my own servants in order to escape?"

"Your servants?" I repeated stupidly.

"Rosario is my servant: she will tell you so herself."

"Until to-morrow," broke in the girl.

The Brazilian turned towards her, and I knew that her words, spoken on the spur of the moment, had been a mistake. Alvares flushed again, and his eyes unmistakably showed his hate.

"Until to-morrow, young woman? Until the end of your life, you mean."

"No!" The girl spoke imperiously, and I loved her for her independence. "Until to-morrow I have promised. Until to-morrow I am . . . on your side."

"You said," remarked the Brazilian in a cold, impersonal sort of voice, "until to-morrow. I said until the end of your life. It's all the same thing. You are not again to see the light of day."

Now I had no doubt at all that Don Jose meant every single word which he had spoken, and that is perhaps what drove me to desperation; but I had to do something: I could not stand aside and see the girl I loved tormented and threatened and brow-beaten. I knew that he was fully prepared for desperate measures: the presence of his automatic, held so that it pointed unswervingly at my heart, was ample proof of that. And I knew also that my own gun would take too much getting from my pocket to be brought into action before the Brazilian could use his. So with the best intentions in the world I literally threw away any chance we had.

I leapt at him: Alvares, with a quickness which startled me, for I could see that I had missed him almost as I leapt, moved aside. I crashed against the door, and even as I struggled to regain my balance the Brazilian struck me deftly on the temple with the butt of his vicious little pistol. I could see it coming, but I could not stop it.

I suppose that I collapsed senseless to the floor. At any rate I remember nothing more until suddenly I opened my eyes to find my wrists and ankles bound neatly with handkerchiefs, and that I was sitting on an arm-chair on one side of the gas-fire. On the other was Rosario, also bound and also in a chair. Something unpleasant was in my mouth: I realized that I could not make a sound, that I was gagged even as was the girl.

My head ached with great throbs, but I forced myself to concentrate. The effort, however, was useless. What could I do? It infuriated me to think that here were Rosario and I in such a desperate plight, and outside the window, blissfully unaware of all that was happening behind the heavy curtains, Tony Valais was more than probably calmly smoking a cigarette. I realized that my hasty action in trying to force the issue with the Brazilian had only served to precipitate us to our doom, and that all hope had gone. I looked across at my love, and tried to tell her with my eyes exactly how I felt. I think she understood, for I believe she smiled.

But Alvares had noticed that I had come to my senses, and he came towards me from the dressing-table, where he had been busy with some small instrument which at that distance I could not define. I noticed also that there were no longer only the three of us in that room: my still rather fuddled brain could just make out the presence of two other olive-skinned men: evidently Don Jose Alvares had not overlooked the possible necessity for reinforcements, and had been fully prepared in case I should offer unexpected opposition.

Alvares was now standing over me: he leant down so that his face was but a few inches from me, and his eyes blazed into mine: he spoke in that caustic, cutting way of his from between lips which scarcely moved.

"Can you understand what I am saying, Captain Graeme?"

I nodded. The pain in my head ached so much that it made me feel physically ill, but my brain was now comparatively clear.

"Listen attentively, then. I found you with your arms around Rosario . . . you have chosen by that action precisely how you shall be found when you are dead. I hope that pleases you."

He laughed, but it was anything but a sound of mirth: it was a mockery, a caricature of a laugh, and involuntarily I recoiled.

"Rosario and yourself shall be lovers just as you desire to be. But instead of in life, you shall be lovers in death."

I stared at the man: he was talking in riddles, but there was something so menacing, so purposeful, not merely in his voice but in his whole attitude, that a sudden chill ran through me. Although the meaning behind his words was still far from clear, yet instantly I realized that my Rosario was indeed in the gravest danger . . . and I impotent to save her. I felt the cold sweat gathering on my brow. I believe that hate and fury had temporarily in that moment made a raving lunatic of Don Jose Alvares: his face glistened in the artificial light, his expression was frankly diabolical.

He laughed again, that ghastly, frightful sound.

"Let me tell you my little plan for your demise, my dear captain. Owing to a regrettable lack of good sense on the part of your police, who will not accept perfectly good money in exchange for a conveniently blind eye, I am constrained to give you a death which will appear to come from natural causes. This most unfortunately means that I must make it pleasant, as far as death can ever be pleasant. My idea, which I flatter myself is a good one, is this."

He paused, and I flinched as I waited for that laugh to come again. But it did not come: he remained quite serious, and something in his silence was even more terrifying than had been the discordant sound.

"You and Rosario are going to die by your own hand: a love-affair gone wrong, shall we say? You will be found to-morrow morning in a gas-filled room, poisoned by the fumes. You will be in each other's arms, she with her head affectionately lying on your breast. And all the world will sigh, and tell each other the story of how another good man went wrong with a foreign charmer, and what comes of it. That is what the world will say: that is how you shall be found.

" But there are obvious difficulties, which perhaps your brain has already noted, if the world is to believe this to be true. Let me show you how I shall get over them. A little morphia, injected into your arm like this . . ."

To my horror he began to pull up the sleeve of my jacket, to take the link from my cuff. I could not resist, for one of Don Jose's satellites was holding me firmly in a grip so strong that it made me flinch with pain.

" . . . just a very little, to keep you under for an hour or two, while the gas does its work and . . . kills . . . you. *Kills you,* Captain Graeme."

As he hissed more than pronounced the last few words, I suddenly felt a sharp prick in my arm. No other pain came to me, however; but at once all hope of rescue, a possibility which had never entirely been banished from my mind, was snuffed out instantaneously. I knew that he had injected morphia into me: I knew that I only had a few more conscious moments in my life: I was appalled at the futility of all our plans, of Mr. Malcolm's, of Tony's and my own, even those of my sweet Rosario.

I looked across the room at her: her eyes were tightly closed as if to shut out my humiliation which was going on before her; I remember wondering if she had fainted.

Then suddenly I noticed that the pain in my head had gone.

I looked again at the evil face of Don Jose Alvares. He was smiling at me: that awful, loathsome twist of the thin, cruel lips.

"When you are both under the dope," he said, very slowly and distinctly, as if afraid that I might not grasp the meaning of his words, afraid lest the full scope of his vengeance should be lost on me, "I shall release you from your bonds, and so pose you that you will present a heartrending picture of great love gone wrong. Poor Alec Graeme! Poor Rosario! Lovers, but only in death. And when you are nicely arranged, then"—he pointed towards the fire—"I shall turn on the gas."

His mood suddenly changed. He started to curse me, to heap upon my defenceless head a whole dictionary of foul invective: but I did not care one jot. A feeling of pleasant sleepiness was gradually overcoming me. I had lost the faculty of coherent thought. I wondered if Mr. Malcolm would be deceived by the scene staged by Don Jose: I wondered if Tony Valais would ever miss me: I knew that neither of them could be in time to save me.

By a huge effort of concentration I fixed my eyes on that glorious, beloved face opposite. I paid no attention to the Brazilian's insults. I admired each and every feature: her lashes, her mouth, her nose, her hair. I found I could not see them very well. I got annoyed, and then wanted to laugh, and felt inclined to cry.

I lost all interest in everything. Something pink floated drunkenly before my eyes. I knew no more.

FOURTEEN

THROUGH the porthole the sun streamed pleasantly, sending a bright ray of brilliant light directly on to a vase of yellow carnations. The sound of little waves caressing the sides of the yacht came gently to my ears, and acted as a soothing tonic. I closed my eyes again, for the light was very bright and hurt them, and I fell back immediately into a sort of coma which seemed to me very refreshing and very delightful. I made no attempt to understand anything: vaguely I realized that I was not dead; vaguely I realized that I was supremely contented not to worry but just to rest.

It must have been an hour or two later before I opened my eyes again, but this time I woke abruptly with a start. I seemed to be very heavy in the head, but otherwise I felt well enough. I raised myself carefully on to one elbow, and saw that I was lying in the bunk of a ship's cabin: but even as I moved a figure came hurrying over to me from a chair by the table, and I saw Mr. Malcolm bending over me.

" Hullo! " I said rather stupidly.

" Hullo! " said Mr. Malcolm. " Feeling better? "

I shook my head tentatively: it seemed to be all right, although I felt that very little effort would reward me with a crashing headache. I moved my arms and my legs, and noted with pleased surprise that my muscles responded to the message from my brain. I looked up at Mr. Malcolm and I smiled.

"Yes. Definitely all right. How has that come about?"

He laughed.

"I know the whole story," he said. "I got it partly from Alvares himself, partly from . . . may I call her Rosario?"

I believe that I began to blush.

"Ask her, not me," I said.

"And there is something frightfully funny about the whole thing," continued Mr. Malcolm. "Yes . . . frightfully funny!"

He roared with laughter. I wagged my head very carefully: that headache seemed to be impending: I could not see how there could possibly be such a good joke.

"What is it?"

"You would have been dead, old chap, dead as a door-nail—by the way, why are door-nails always supposed to be so dead?—if it hadn't been that a man whose creed is that money will buy everything forgot to spend a shilling!"

For a moment I stared at Mr. Malcolm, believing that he had lost his senses: then suddenly I too began to laugh, and I laughed until the tears rolled down my cheeks and Mr. Malcolm's outline became blurred.

" He forgot to spend a shilling ! " I chortled.

" He forgot to spend a shilling ! " gasped Mr. Malcolm, slowly recovering himself. " He omitted to charge the meter ! "

" He didn't know," I giggled weakly, " he didn't know that in country inns you nearly always have to spend a shilling to get a nice gas-fire."

" So when he had arranged you nicely he turned on *nothing* with which to kill you both ! Good Lord, it's *rich* ! "

Mr. Malcolm was thrilled. I wiped my eyes and looked at him.

" Mr. Malcolm," I said more soberly, " where the devil are we now ? "

" We're guests on a yacht," said Mr. Malcolm, " guests of a Brazilian party bound for the South Atlantic and Brazil again."

" Brazil ? Are we going to Brazil ? "

" We are not," said Mr. Malcolm; " they are only waiting for you to recover before putting us ashore and weighing their anchor, or whatever it is they do."

I sat up and spoke seriously.

" Don't speak in riddles," I said rather sharply. " What of Don Jose Alvares ? What happened after we were doped ? Where is Rosario ? "

Mr. Malcolm sat down by my bunk.

" Now see here, Alec," he said quietly, " quite a lot has happened since last we talked. I came down here last night and saw the big boy of the party: he was as close as an oyster: he told me to go away and bring you back with me. There was nothing to do about it, so I left. I came straight back to the inn to see how you were getting on, and just as I was contemplating re-entering your room, I was quietly made a prisoner and packed into a car. In that car I found Don Jose Alvares in a nice neat parcel, and you and Rosario not seeming to care very much about anything. I suddenly realized that my abductors were the very boys I'd just been visiting: they were taking no chances, so they included me in the bound party. And here we all are, safely in the yacht."

He paused. I looked at him, and I realized that there was something on his mind.

"Well?"

"Well," said Mr. Malcolm, "the Alvares affair has been taken clean out of our hands. We can do nothing, Alec. I've made them promise not to touch him until they are out of British waters: then the affair concerns only the Government of Brazil. Feeling stronger?"

I nodded.

"Strong enough to go?"

"Yes."

"All right," said Mr. Malcolm, "I'll send Rosario. But only ten minutes, Alec. They want to be rid of us."

I smiled. Rosario should be the judge of that.

She came. More adorable than ever, she looked at me rather shyly as she closed the door behind her. I took her in my arms.

After a few moments she gently pushed me from her.

" Is it to-morrow yet? " I asked.

She laughed, an enchanting sound.

" Three years ago, almost to this day," she said, " my father could not be . . . bought. But Don Jose started to outline what he was going to do to my mother and my father, and I struck a bargain with him. In exchange for their immunity I was to serve him faithfully for three years. I am free to-day."

And I had suspected the loyalty of this amazing girl! I made as if to draw her to me again, but she gently resisted.

" No, Alec! "

She paused: she seemed to be waiting for something which I would say: I said it.

" Do you love me, Rosario? "

" Perhaps I do, Alec."

" Will you marry me, Rosario? "

" Perhaps I will, Alec."

I did not quite understand her: suddenly she thrust a note into my hand, and fled through the door.

I did not stop her: I looked at the note which she had written.

"*Alec, how can you know whether or no you really love me? Not now, Alec, whilst I am near you: ask me if you still want to later, in Brazil. When you have had time to think it over. But ask me if you can, Alec, my sweet.—Rosario.*"

I smiled: I went to the door of the cabin, but she was nowhere to be seen. Instead Mr. Malcolm came towards me.

"Where's Rosario?" I asked.

"Come on," said Mr. Malcolm, "we've got to go."

"Where's Rosario?" I repeated. "I want to ask her something."

"The only way to make a woman do what you want," said Mr. Malcolm, "is to do what she wants. Trust an old bachelor, they always know."

He paused a moment, and then added rather as an afterthought:

"Anyway, she told me so. And you can catch a nice comfortable boat which will get to Brazil just as soon as this frail yacht."

I appeared still undecided: Mr. Malcolm clinched the matter.

"Start by doing as she tells you," he said. "You'll have to get accustomed to it, and in any case she probably prefers to be married in her old home town!"

. . . .

We had rowed a long way to land: Mr. Malcolm, Tony and I were very tired and very hot.

"Why did they give us this telescope?" I asked suddenly.

Without a word Mr. Malcolm took it from my hand, and placing it to his eye adjusted it. Then, after a few moments, he handed it to me.

"Look," he said, and pointed to the dot far away, nearly on the horizon, which was the yacht.

I looked through the telescope. At first I could see nothing odd, then I noticed that the flag was at half-mast.

"Money will *not* buy everything," said Mr. Malcolm.

THE END